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OF STRIFE

ROBERT AMES BENNET

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WATERS OF STRIFE

WATERS OF STRIFE

BY

ROBERT AMES BENNET
AUTHOR OF "BLOOM OF CACTUS"

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WATERS OF STRIFE

WATERS OF STRIFE

CHAPTER I

THE CUP OF BITTERNESS

IN the fierce heat of the southern Arizona mid-afternoon, the veranda of the March ranch house offered a relatively cool refuge.

Josie March danced out through the front doorway waving a glass pitcher half full of lemons.

"*Bueno,* dad!" she said exultingly. "I've found them. I just knew Aunt Hetty must have cached some of the last case."

The hatchet-faced woman beside the door stopped the monotonous sway of her rocking chair long enough for a tart reproof.

"You have no business snooping in the pantry, Josephine. I kept them back for Sunday. You know how fond William is of lemon pie."

Over in the other side of the veranda March jerked the pipe from his clenched teeth and brought his back-tilted chair down upon the plank floor with a thump.

"That'll do, Het," he began blusteringly.

A pair of shapely little hands darted down over the cattleman's shock of irongray hair and big red face. They closed upon the savage mouth.

"Now, now, dad, behave! We're going to have our lemonade.—And, Aunt Hetty, I'll go to town myself, so Bill needn't miss his pie."

Hetty Lomax smiled rather sourly and began her monotonous rocking.

"Extra trip to town just for Bill's pie!" growled March. "Oil up a cent and gas another two cents!"

But he put the pipe back in his mouth. At this sign of peace Josie skipped around to the table upon which she had set the pitcher.

In rapid succession her deft fingers squeezed the juice of the rolled lemons into the pitcher. She sprang to dip cool water from the big sweating *olla* of porous earthenware that hung from a beam of the veranda.

Aunt Hetty grasped her glass of the acid drink and sipped at it between intervals of rocking. March tossed down his first glassful

at a gulp, but leaned back to sip his second. Over the uptilted grim his hard gray eyes fixed upon a horseman, half a mile north on the dusty road.

"You'll need another glass, Jo," he remarked.

The girl flashed about to gaze at the approaching rider.

"It's not one of the town boys. He didn't take the cut-across trail," she said. "Must be a stranger. He rides like a puncher. I wonder what brings him out here."

"I let them know in town I'd take on a good man," replied March. "I've stood enough of Corveau's foolishness. He's got to go."

"Oh, dad! You know Sid means all right. We haven't a better top rider. It's only when he gets a few drinks of moonshine——"

"Last time he brought out a whole jugful," broke in March. "He and the three new men Bill hired when I went to bring you home—they emptied the jug in one night. Next morning O'Keefe had to be lifted into his saddle. It's that damnable *mescal* bootleg that's being smuggled across the Border. Even Bill's eyes were bloodshot."

Mrs. Lomax flounced up out of the rocker and glared at her step-brother with the look of a ruffled mother hen.

"Shame on you, Wynn! You know William's eyes weren't bloodshot the least bit—and, anyway, it was just that sandstorm made them so. He took only a little nip—because last winter Doc Perkins told him it was the best medicine for the flu."

"Flu medicine—*bah!*" derided March. "That *mescal* whiskey is liquid hellfire. I told Bill flat—and I tell you now—if I catch him drinking the stuff again, the Bar L will have a new foreman."

Bill's mother sniffed and withdrew around the corner of the house.

"Dad, how could you?" murmured Josie, "You've cracked her feelings all to pieces."

"It's been coming to her for nigh on a month, daughter. She's got to let up on you, or I'll bite her head off. Give me a kiss."

He was a rough-spoken, blustering, hot-tempered man, not often in a mild mood even to his only child and most precious possession.

Neither gave much thought to the approaching stranger until he came alongside the house and started to ride past toward the corral. He must have seen the couple in the far end of the veranda, but he gave no sign of the fact. March was as quick as Josie to note this avoidance of

intrusiveness. He raised his hand in a curt beckoning gesture.

The big sorrel horse of the stranger swerved around and came to a stop before the steps of the veranda. The rider's hand went up in a movement that started like a soldier's salute and ended in the offsweep of his weathered stetson. His sturdily built frame showed the hard-muscled leanness of an outdoor man.

Josie had gone to fill a glass from the pitcher of lemonade. The visitor turned his gaze that way, though he spoke to her father.

"Am I right in thinking this is the ranch of Mr. March—Mr. Windy March?"

The big cowman frowned. Years had passed since anyone had spoken his nickname to his face. But the young man was a stranger and therefore perhaps to be excused.

"March is my name. 'Light and have a drink."

"Thanks. It's a dry forty mile from Ariquito." Hat in hand, the visitor swung to the ground and dropped the reins over the sagging head of his horse. "Chico tanked up at your waterhole. But I never did fancy slough scum —with an *olla* within half an hour's ride."

"Come and get it," invited Josie. "*Olla aqua*

it is, with enough lemon juice to cut all the alkali you've eaten between here and town."

The visitor took the steps at a bound. But he did not clutch at the offered glass. He stopped short to take in the fresh cool loveliness of the girl. His smile was delightfully boyish.

When he took the lemonade he raised the glass to her and then to her father with the old Western, "Here's how!"

As Josie refilled the glass, a big lank-limbed youngish man swung around the corner of the house, under the veranda. March had been glowering over the stranger's unconcealed admiration for his daughter. He caught at the chance to interrupt.

"Here's Mr. Lomax, my foreman.—Bill, show this boy around and see if he has the savvy. If he can throw a rope, we'll take him on in place of Corveau."

Bill Lomax shot a resentful glance at the stranger.

"Ma told me, Uncle Wynn," he protested. "There's lots worse than Sid. He's the best of all topmen—champion shot, champion buster, and——"

"Champion guzzler!" exploded March. "You heard me. If this boy is not a drunkard, he's hired, and Corveau's fired."

"Excuse me, Mr. March," quietly cut in the visitor. "I'm not looking for a job with you just now."

"What?"

The young man drew out a long envelope from the front of his shirt.

"My name is Stanhope—Bruce Stanhope. Been running wild horses up in the Tonto Basin. Three weeks ago I had a letter from my uncle. Hadn't heard from him for ten years. He didn't write much; but he sent me his will. Made me think he might be sick. So I took a *pasear* down this way to look him up."

"Your uncle?"

"Yes—Peter Haines."

"Haines!"—March came to his feet, with fists clenched and an angry flush darkening the brick-red of his face. Josie ran to clasp his arm.

"Wait, dad! Can't you see he knows nothing about it? If he hasn't heard for ten years, as he says——"

"All right. But I'll have no kith or kin of Haines on my ranch or range."

Bruce Stanhope set down his half-emptied glass, turned toward the steps, and paused to bow to Josie.

"Thanks for your hospitality, Miss March.

No doubt Uncle Pete will explain the situation. Good day."

The girl's cheeks went white. Her father pushed her behind him with a sweep of his thick arm.

"You'll find no one at the Box B," he said. "A week ago Haines died—suddenly . . . You're trying to play me. They must have told you in town."

"Chico and I landed at Ariquito on the four A. M. train," Bruce explained, with good-humored restraint. "We stopped in town only long enough to ask the way to the Box B. Station agent told me to take the road out past your ranch. He may not have heard of Uncle Pete's death."

"If you ask me," put in Bill Lomax, "I'd say he savvies enough to keep his lip buttoned."

"And you don't," rumbled March. His gray eyes shifted warily back to his visitor. "It's true what my daughter says, young man. You've had nothing to do with what Haines did. But my advice is, hit back to Ariquito and clear out of the country. Midway south to Grass Valley is a horse trail 'cross the mountains. It will save you nigh on twenty miles."

"Thanks." Bruce put on his hat with thoughtful deliberation. "You say my uncle is dead.

That means I own the Box B. My intention is to take possession . . . and find out how he came to die—suddenly."

The freckled hand of Lomax dropped to the holster on his hip. The red of March's face deepened to purple. Bruce turned his back upon both men and walked slowly down the steps to mount his horse. Lomax slipped away around the corner of the house.

In the saddle Bruce paused while he lifted his hat to Josie. His dark face was grave with unconcealed regret. As he jogged past the house, out of sight, the girl put an entreating hand on the arm of her father.

"Dad—you've admitted he's not to blame."

"Yes, that's the worst—dammit! The young cuss has grit. But he's the same blood as Pete Haines."

CHAPTER II

WORMWOOD AND HONEY

BEYOND the group of ranch buildings—bunkhouse, barn and sheds—the road straggled feebly away to the south along the base of the abrupt front ridge. It showed only slight traces of travel even where the wheel ruts had not been drifted over by the last sandstorm. The hot red of the ridge's bare porphyry wall was in keeping with the sallow sun-dried grass, the gray-green of the yuccas and cacti, the shimmer of the fierce sunrays on the yellow sand.

Bruce's pleasant blue eyes narrowed as he gazed off into that glaring desolution of heat and light. He had ridden forty miles over similar country, only to be sent on along his way like an outcast . . . And his uncle had met a sudden death——

He saw Lomax loping ahead to the big post-and-wire corral. The turn of the road around

the barn hid the foreman from view. Why should he ride ahead with such haste?

Bruce glanced around and then down at the rifle scabbard under the flap of his stirrup strap. There was nothing to prevent him from circling out on the open ground, at the opposite side of the corral from the barn—nothing, that is, except his self respect. He kept to the road.

Around the far corner of the barn Lomax stood talking with a thickset grizzled man and a small sandy young fellow who sported a Mexican sash-girdle under his cartridge belt. Bruce would have jogged past.

The foreman hailed him with a noncommital, "Hey, there. I want a word with you."

A backward glance showed Bruce that the place was out of sight from the ranch house. Each of the cowboys carried a brace of Colts holstered at the front of his belt. They were specimens of that almost extinct species, the two-gun man.

The older one had a morose hard-bitten look. But Bruce's gaze at once fixed upon the smiling de'il-may-care face of the sandy one. Though the young fellow's eyes were as mild as a girl's, a rim of white showed under the brown-black irises.

Bruce nodded in quiet greeting—"Good day, gentlemen."

Lomax jerked a thumb toward his companions.

"Mebbe you've heard of Sid Corveau and Pat O'Keefe."

"Never before had the pleasure.—What's the word you want with me, Mr. Lomax?"

"Just a gentle hint," replied the foreman. "This range is apt to be unhealthy for some people."

"So I've been given to understand. But I figure my health won't suffer just now. I don't pack a pistol, and——" Bruce looked gravely down at the smaller cowboy——"you have one man here who'll not stand for any shooting in the back."

Lomax and the older puncher scowled at the shrewd thrust. The young one threw up his hands in mock surrender.

"*Wow!* He's gone and got the drop on me, Bill. He's shelled out my guns. I'm plumb disarmamented."

"Cut it out, Sid." The voice of the foreman betrayed an undernote of alarm. "I tell you he's Haines's nephew, and he's come looking for trouble. Cover him, O'Keefe."

Sid Corveau's hands came down and hooked their thumbs in the scarlet girdle, just above the revolver butts.

"Irish to the rear," he mocked. "Orders to wireless headquarters for two batteries of machine-guns. Mr. Lomax misdoubts the safety of five poppers against none."

"But I tell you, Sid——"

"Tell hades! Bill, you're almost as good a sport as a skunk. If this here Mr. Haines, Junior——"

"Not Haines—Stanhope."

"I stand corrected. If Mr. Stanhope is looking for trouble, I'll loan him one of my guns, and we'll take a *pasear* 'round the barn in opposite directions."

"Sure. Go to it, kid," urged O'Keefe. "It's a dead cinch, Bill."

Bruce swung a leg over his saddlehorn and leaned toward Corveau.

"I'm a stranger in these parts, *amigo*. Would you mind telling me what's the trouble for which I'm supposed to be looking?"

At the question O'Keefe's heavy jaw dropped.

Lomax stepped around behind him. But Corveau grinned up cheerfully at the questioner.

"That's easy to answer. Haines was caught brand-blotting——"

Bruce came down flat-footed beside his horse, his fists clenched.

"It's a black lie!"

"Hold on."—Corveau swung around to face Lomax and O'Keefe. "Unless he draws, you two will keep your hands clear, if you savvy what's good for you."

Behind him Bruce repeated the hot conviction:

"It's a black lie! Come ahead. I'll take you on singly or all in a bunch."

Corveau turned to him and put out a remonstrating hand.

"You don't savvy. It can't be settled that way. Hit out while the going's good. If you've got to know the facts, there was a necktie party held last week for the special benefit of your uncle."

So the cat was out of the bag—at last! It was no tame house tabby, but a long-fanged vicious wild cat. For once the reckless face of young Corveau took on a serious look. Bruce stared from him to the older men. Their gaze shifted and lowered. He groped for his saddle, pulled himself up, and started his horse off at a walk.

From behind him came no taunt or shot. After he had ridden some distance, a soul-sickening question pierced its way into his dazed mind and could not be forced out unanswered——

Would they have dared to let him escape alive unless they could prove that his uncle had been guilty? They had killed Peter Haines for rustling—for brand-blotting. . . . Yet that was impossible. He could not have been a cattle-thief. In ten years some men may become bad; never such a man as Uncle Pete!

The long miles drifted past, unheeded by Bruce. He was only vaguely aware of the steep red ramp of the ridge on his right and of the desert growths alongside the winding, faintly marked road—yuccas, columns of the giant cactus, patches of scrubby mesquite. The sorrel was a fast walker, and his pace had lost none of its briskness even after the long trip from Ariquito around the north end of the mountains. Near the middle of the second hour he turned off the road onto a trail that led up an arroyo.

Bruce roused enough from his brooding to note that the trail-arroyo rose through a cleft in the front ridge, too steep for wagon passage. He wheeled his horse back into the sand-blurred road that wound on southward along the base of the mountain.

Another two hours found him rounding into a gap where the bed of the shallow little creek meandered out through a steep-sided break in

the front ridge. Within the gap—which measured a good half mile across—a great, trough-like valley stretched away to the south-southwest between the mountain ridges.

As far as Bruce could see, the valley bottom was covered with a rank growth of coarse dry bunchgrass. This, of course, was Grass Valley. But it was not the bed of the creek. The channel of the stream merely cut across its north end, from a cañon of the cedar-tufted inner mountains to the gap through the sterile front ridge.

Half a mile up the creek Bruce sighted the top of a little tent-roofed shack on the bank of the creek's arroyo. Somehow the small shelter that had been a human habitation seemed to redouble the desolation and loneliness of its surroundings. No smoke spiraled up from the stovepipe to temper the crimson glare of the sun-flaming western sky.

The corral of cottonwood poles and gnarled mesquite stems was empty. In all the valley could be seen no living creature except the black-winged vulture that soared high above the little tent house. Beside the shack grew a peach tree.

When Bruce jogged up along the edge of the arroyo he saw that the large leaves of the lone

fruit tree were drooping and withered after the few days of neglect. They pointed dejectedly downward toward the mound at the base of the trunk.

He slid out of his saddle and stood with bared head at the foot of the unmarked grave.

The thirsty horse worked over toward a path down the steep pitch of the arroyo bank, trailing his bridle reins to one side. Bruce roused himself to strip saddle and bridle from the weary beast and led him down to the creek. Though lukewarm, the water was clear and fairly fresh.

Beside the covered spring barrel lay a pair of five-gallon kerosene-can buckets, and he carried one full of water into the shack.

Though the floor was only of beaten clay, the place appeared singularly neat and clean. If the killers had entered, they had gone out again without leaving any sign of pillage.

Bruce shook the blankets from the bunk and swept underneath to make sure he had no visiting scorpions, centipedes, tarantulas, or rattlesnakes. After this precaution, he took stock of his possessions.

In addition to a mixed case of canned goods, the row of old tin food boxes—untarnished by

years of service in this arid land—held goodly supplies of sugar, meal, flour, coffee, and dried fruit. From the ridge pole hung two hams and a side of bacon.

His hunger at last satisfied, Bruce eased down into the rawhide campchair beside the doorway.

The clouded blue eyes stared hard into the angry red of the sunset. . . . His uncle had been done to death on a false charge—it must have been false. Some of March's men were responsible for the killing, some if not all of them—possibly March himself.

But along with the remembrance of the old cattleman's big passion-flushed face came a vision of his daughter—so gracious and lovely. To strike the father would be to strike her. Still, there were those others—Bill Lomax and his gunmen. They must be made to pay for what they had done. . . . If only the girl were not March's daughter!

The glare of the sunset had died out into ash gray. The highest clouds in the twilight western sky dulled through maroon to the blackness of the thicker clouds below. Dusk stole out of the mountain clefts and overspread the valley. Stars shone in the indigo vault above the blackened mass of the mountains. From up the creek came the howl of a lone wolf.

Bruce went in to stretch himself upon the bunk. He was only twenty-two. His last conscious thought was not of his uncle or the lynchers, but the smile of Josie March.

CHAPTER III

NOT HEELED

DAWN in the desert has a tang of cold even in midsummer. The sleeper rolled over, struck his head against the butt of his rifle, and sat up to stare out through the open doorway of the shack.

Sight of the grave, vaguely outlined in the dim gray light, chilled the glow of his pleasant dreams and brought him face to face with hard realities. The Bar L virtually admitted responsibility for the death of his uncle, and they accused the dead man of a crime even more heinous than horse stealing. What right had his nephew to think of Josie March?

Bruce faced the situation without wincing. He would first make certain of the whole truth, then act accordingly. But in no event would he allow himself to be run out of the country. Not all the bluster of Windy March could blow him away.

While he was still at his hasty breakfast, red dawn warmed the chill grayness outside. The bitterness of his mood eased.

When he loped away on his sorrel, the direction that he took was not down the creek, but along a well-marked trail that led into the north corner of Grass Valley. Easy to guess this had been Peter Haines' usual route to town. It no doubt lessened the distance as well as saved him from going past the Bar L.

The trail soon wound up the lower slopes, through growths of scrub oak and sage, to the cedar-crowned summit. At the crest, as Bruce expected, he turned into the main trail where it headed out of the steep cleft of the arroyo on the east. From this point a westward jog of twelve miles along the high cross ridges of the mountains brought him to the sharp pitch into Ariquito.

The centre of the little shack-and-adobe "cow town" was an old Spanish *casa,* or fortress-mansion, that had been converted into town hall, courthouse, and jail. Bruce found the white-haired county judge intent upon a game of checkers with Sheriff Pierson, a dried-up shrewd-eyed little man. The judge glanced up.

"Only want to file a will, your honor. Go ahead. You've got him corraled."

"Sure thing," admitted Pierson. "I cave."

He swept the last checkers from the board. The judge opened the paper handed to him by Bruce, deliberately folded it, and looked up at its owner with a not unkind scrutiny.

"You are the party named as legatee?" he asked.

"Yes, sir. I suppose I'll have to bring in the witnesses, and get lawyers to show it's a real will, and prove who I am."

"No need of any lawyer, son. The will is valid. Pete had me draw it myself. Not apt to find errors in my own legal work am I?"

"Pete?" queried Pierson—"Pete Haines? This the will I witnessed for him?"

Bruce met the stab of the sheriff's suspicious glance with cool steadiness.

"I've been out to the Bar L. I've heard what they have to say about my uncle. You can guess what I think of it when I tell you I'm here to prove myself the nephew of Peter Haines. I haven't seen him for ten years; but I know he was square and white. I don't intend to quit till I've rounded up the murderers who lynched him."

"Brakes, young man, brakes," advised the sheriff, his eyes blinking. "First place, there was a warrant out against Pete. Second place,

he wasn't lynched—he was shot while resisting arrest. Third place——"

"Whoever swore out that warrant perjured himself," broke in Bruce. "Uncle Pete never rustled so much as a leg of veal."

The old judge regretfully shook his white head.

"Sorry, son. I counted Pete one of my friends, and I've had my share of trouble with Windy March. But March called for an inquest on the spot. The evidence was conclusive. Had the charge against Pete come to trial, any jury must have brought in a verdict against him."

"It don't pay for a man to batch out all alone that way," remarked the sheriff. "Best I can figger, he got to brooding and went *loco*. That brand-blotting was mighty raw work. Even a kid could have done a slicker job."

"That's what the Bar L outfit told you!"

Pierson leaned back and fixed the challenger with a gimlet gaze.

"Now, look here, young man," he advised. "Don't kick up a rumpus till you know where you're at. Windy March helped elect me. He's a mighty good friend of mine. Just the same, I don't take the say-so of any man when it comes to a criminal charge. Half Ariquito went out

to the inquest. We didn't have to be told anything by the Bar L. We saw them cows with our own eyes."

The kindly eyes of the old judge gave reluctant confirmation to the statement. Yet Bruce was silenced only for a moment.

"Well—maybe you have the evidence. . . . But you can't make me believe that of Uncle Pete. There's something crooked about this deal. Here's one lie. You say he wasn't lynched but was shot while resisting arrest. One of March's gunmen—Sid Corveau they called him—bragged that it was a necktie party."

"The young devil! Trying to start something, heh?"

This time Bruce had to admit to himself that he had no case. Neither of these elderly officers was a liar. He could not entirely fight down the sickening thought that his uncle might really have been guilty. If he had been shot while resisting arrest—if there had been no lynching—then March and his men could not be blamed for the killing.

For the first time since dawn he permitted himself to picture again the vision of Josie March in the veranda of the Bar-L ranch house. The possibility of being a neighbor on friendly terms with the girl filled him with a pleasant

glow. He forgot the other side of the situation.

"I'm willing to call quits, gentlemen," he admitted. "The Bar L has no need to bind me over to keep the peace—Now, about the will, Your Honor."

"Guess I can take your oath you're the Bruce Stanhope named in it. The other witness is Ollie Bray, our county recorder. Come on in."

Bray proved to be a very tall young man, dressed in what he considered the very latest New York style. He beamed until told the identity of the visitor. At that his manner chilled to a supercilious reserve more galling than frank hostility.

As soon as he had testified as witness to the will he hastened out. But he came hurrying back while the judge was signing the order that gave Bruce control of the Haines estate.

"Better keep this man under cover, Pierse," he warned the sheriff. "I saw the Bar L car at the postoffice."

"There's going to be no trouble," said Bruce. 'They know I don't pack a gun—and you've given me to understand I've no cause to get one. *Muchas gracias,* Your Honor, for putting through the will."

He gave the judge a hearty handshake and

walked out, with no visible concern in his look. Half an hour later he came from the little red brick bank and rode his horse across the street to the rear of the big touring car that stood before the door of the post-office and general merchandise store.

Sid Corveau lurched around the corner from the shady side of the building. His unsteady gait and flushed face told all too plainly that he had been drinking. Bruce saw this, yet swung down to hitch his horse. Through the open doorway of the store rang a girlish laugh. Corveau staggered back behind the corner.

The storekeeper appeared with a double armful of packages. After him Lomax bore a crate of lemons in his long arms. Josie March darted out and around the men to open the door of the car. At sight of Bruce she stopped short and stood poised, her smile fading.

He lifted his hat to her. She turned away without the slightest sign of recognition.

"Where is Sid?" she asked.

"He said to stop by for him at the blacksmith shop. Went to pick out the horseshoes," explained Lomax, his pale eyes shooting uneasy side glances at Bruce.

Josie started the moment the supplies had been loaded into the tonneau of the car, but

Bruce stood beside his horse, gazing after it as it rolled away up the broad dusty street. For the first time he realized what it meant to be the nephew of a rustler. The one person in all the world for whose good opinion he cared had cut him dead.

Close behind him a thick voice jeered raucously:

"Got what was coming to you, huh?"

He looked around into the liquor-flushed face of Corveau. The bloodshot eyes showed a widened line of white under their irises. The slit-like mouth twisted into an ugly sneer.

But the quiet good-humor of Bruce's look stirred a responsive impulse in the alcohol-poisoned brain. Corveau pulled out an almost empty flask.

"Join me," he invited. "Le's drink to the dear departing one ere he departs. Wha' say?"

"I couldn't think of depriving you of your last drink, Mr. Corveau."

"Meaning you won't drink wi' me!"

The sneer returned to Corveau's lips. He drained the liquor down his throat and spun the flask into the air overhead. It showered down in fragments. He had drawn, fired, and flipped the revolver back into its holster swifter than Bruce's eye could follow.

"I'll show you," he threatened. "Won't drink wi' me, huh?"

Bruce had never before been closer to death. He stood motionless, with no change in his good-humored smile.

"You forget I'm not heeled, Sid."

"I'll heel you! Soon's I saw your sorrel I knew you'd got cold feet. You're *vamosing*—you've quit cold. Never did like a quitter. I'm going to warm up your feet. Dance!"

Two bullets spurted the dust within an inch of Bruce's toes. He took a desperate chance. Instead of dancing, he faced about and started to walk away. Two more shots—his feet jarred as if the heels of his boots had been struck with a hammer. Each boot came down without a heel.

A grunt and thud brought Bruce's glance over his shoulder. Frightened by the shots, his plunging horse had cannoned against Corveau and sprawled him flat in the dust. Bruce whirled and jumped. When the dust cleared he had a revolver in each hand and was holding Corveau face down to the ground in the rib-crushing grip of his knees. He stood up and stepped clear, to flip open the revolver cylinders and shake out the unfired cartridges.

All up and down the main street of the town

curious men and boys were peering from windows and doorways and around the corners of buildings. A small man came running from the town hall.

Down the road whirled a big touring car. It swooped upon Bruce from the rear and scrunched to a sudden stop alongside him. Almost within arm's-length Josie March stared out at him and Corveau, her brown eyes distended with fear.

"You—you've killed Sid!" she accused.

"No such luck. Only twisted his trigger fingers taking away his popguns. He's a bit too careless with them. Boot heels cost money.—Get up, Corveau, here's your ambulance."

Corveau struggled to a sitting position, his face purple with drunken rage and shame. Bruce handed the revolvers to Josie. The fear in her eyes changed to bewilderment.

"Why, they're both Sid's! You took them away from him—from Sid Corveau?"

"Not singlehanded," disclaimed Bruce. "I had help from Chico and John Barleycorn."

Sheriff Pierson elbowed his way through the crowd that had swarmed the moment Josie stopped her car.

"What's the trouble here?" he demanded.

"Nothing much, Mr. Pierson," Josie made

light of the affair. "It's only that Sid found some more moonshine. But you know how dad feels. You'd better lock Sid up till he's sober."

She jabbed the starter of her engine and began to wrench at the steering wheel. The car swerved around and shot back up the street toward the blacksmith's shop.

CHAPTER IV

AN OVERTURNING

LATE in the afternoon Bruce struck back over the mountains, without new boots, but with new heels on his old pair; without any illusions as to the feeling of the town people toward his uncle, but with much valuable information about his uncle's affairs.

Most of the citizens knew all about Pete Haines. He had got his, simply and solely on account of standing up for his rights against the Bar L. It was only another case of the small man against a big outfit. Windy March was hard to get along with. Too bad that old Pete had been caught trying to even up the score with a branding iron.

Bruce felt a double repugnance to these undesirable sympathizers. They believed his uncle guilty, yet condoned the crime. But he was a good listener, and their talk gave him many side lights on the situation.

The friction between Haines and March went

back to the very first, when Haines had bought the Box B brand and filed on the section in the gap of Grass Valley. Before that March had held undisputed possession of all the public range on the east side of the mountains. For Billings, first owner of the Box B, had been virtually an employee of the Bar L.

Back at his little home shack, Bruce put in three days studying the situation. On the first he rode more than twelve miles south along the trough of the valley. He found neither water nor a second gap out to the open plains. The second day he spent up the creek.

Ages of wear by water-borne sand and gravel had cut a vertical slit through the narrow face of the inner mountains. Bruce passed in through the wire gate that closed the lower end of the cleft. At one place, well up its winding course, the little cañon measured less than seven yards across for a height of two or three hundred feet. At the head of this gorge towered a huge pinacle, or chimney rock, divided from the cliff wall by a narrow fissure that reached almost to the bottom of the cañon.

The big sorrel splashed on up the summer-shallowed stream, feeling his sure-footed way over the water-polished ledges of the creek bed. Before long the gorge opened upon a triangular

valley, whose marshy growths of reeds, cat-tails, and willows seemed oddly out of keeping with the semi-desert vegetation of all the country around.

Bruce noticed old driftwood and other flood marks well up on the precipitous slopes that walled the flat bottom of the valley. Here was the reason for the gate down the cañon. Cattle caught in the valley by a cloudburst would have slight chance to escape drowning.

In the chaparral of the narrowed valley, higher up among the inner mountains, Bruce saw signs of deer. But he was not out for venison. When he worked his way back over the ridges to Grass Valley, he brought with him a clear idea of the upper country. Though poor for cattle, it offered fairly good grazing for sheep.

March had said that no relative of Peter Haines should stay on his range. The range belonged to the public domain. But since the death of Haines, the Bar L was in sole possession, and it was a big outfit.

Bruce realized that his position was doubly insecure. He had no case against the Bar L for the killing of his uncle, and he was the heir of a man whom public opinion had convicted of rustling. Yet he intended neither to quit nor to allow the Bar L to ride him.

So far he had seen no cattle. The valley may have been kept clear as a reserve in case of a poor grass crop on the main range outside. More probably, March had ordered all stock driven out of the valley, after the killing of Haines. In either case, the Box B cattle must have mingled with the Bar L.

On the third day Bruce took the road toward the March ranch. Midway he fell in with scattered bunches of cattle grazing near the creek. Almost all were heading toward Grass Valley. He rode slowly in and out among them.

The greater number had a back-slanted slit in the ear and bore March's old Lomax brand, Bar L. The ears of the rest were notched. Their brand was a B in a square—[B]. Each of those animals Bruce studied with careful scrutiny. He soon found a cow whose ear notch had only half healed. The brand also was fresh.

Sheriff Pierson had been right in saying that the brand-blotting was a bungle. Any one with half an eye could see traces of the old Brand L̄ under the new burn of the [B]. The sheriff may have been no less right in thinking that Haines had gone mad from brooding. No man able to reason could have hoped to escape detection for such raw work . . . unless—Bruce did not blink the possibility—unless the scheme

had been to keep the brand-blotted cattle up in the hills until they could be run south across the Border.

A calf branded with the Box B but sucking a Bar L cow sickened him from any further investigation. He had seen enough to confirm the judge's opinion that trial of Peter Haines would have meant a verdict of guilty. The old jurist had been compelled to believe the worst against his friend. Even the family loyalty of Bruce could no longer resist the damning evidence of his uncle's guilt.

He rode back to the valley with his head downbent in shame. He was the nephew of a rustler. His mother's brother had been a cattle-thief—a sneaking brand-blotter. The family had been branded. . . .

No doubt March would pay something for the Haines section, and some of the cattle rightfully belonged to the Haines estate. Why not sell out and slip away to Wyoming or Montana, where the disgrace of the dead man might never be heard of? Here the sorry affair was already known by everybody. The heir would have to live down what had happened, besides having to face the active hostility of the Bar L.

Bruce was not a quitter. But few even of the most resolute men care to fight without any in-

centive. He no longer could see the slightest inducement to stay. All his hope of clearing his uncle had now been shattered. Josie March had shown all too clearly her feeling against him. He was too healthy minded to fight for the mere sake of enmity against the man whose brand had been blotted.

He came back to the shack with his mind made up to sell out and leave the country. Even the sight of the grave under the lonesome peach tree failed to shake his decision. It only reminded him of the brand-blotted cow and the sucking calf. In his bunk he made an added resolve to leave at once. No need of delay even at Ariquito. The old judge had been a friend of Haines. He would negotiate the sale to March.

The moon went down an hour before midnight. Hardly had the silver edge of its upper rim dipped below the mountains when the whinney of Chico, the sorrel horse, half roused Bruce from his heavy sleep. He listened drowsily. Chico did not repeat the call.

All about the shack was the dead silence of the desert. Bruce's grip on his rifle relaxed. He turned over with his face to the side of the shack and dozed off again.

Into his mind flashed a vivid dream. He was

mounting a strange horse—a vicious outlaw. Josie March stood at one side, smiling. No, her face was cold and repellant. She had challenged him to ride the outlaw. The broncho began to buck. He sunfished. Bruce felt himself zooming up out of the saddle. In his ears ran the jeering yells of the Bar L punchers. He had been thrown—was falling—

Crash!—r-r-rip! The branches of a thornbush jabbed up through the rotten canvas of the shack roof to meet his fall. The shack rolled over again, on down the steep side of the arroyo. *Crash!*—it hit the trees at the bottom.

Bruce stared up at the stars—both real and illusory—that danced above his face. From the top of the bank burst out more yells and a ragged volley of shots. Some of the bullets whizzed down through the darkness toward the unseen wreck of the shack. They fanned the air uncomfortably close over Bruce's face. He flattened out under the thornbush in furious helplessness.

No need for him to guess at the situation. The Bar L punchers had come to haze him. They had playfully tipped his shack over into the arroyo. One of those little practical jokes that nesters can expect in a cow country. Most of the jokers were laughing and firing into the air.

But at least one of them kept his weapon pointed low. Ten or a dozen shots blazed down the bank.

In the somersaulting of the shack, Bruce's rifle had been flung out of the bunk with him. But his groping hands failed to find it anywhere within arm's-reach. All he could do was to clench his teeth and lie still.

He had not long to wait. One after another the hazers ceased firing. The yells and laughter suddenly choked off into blank silence. The voice of Pat O'Keefe grumbled morosely:

"Hell, Bill, he ain't even cheeped. Must have got wise and *vamosed.*"

"I'll eat my hat if he wasn't in the shack—unless he slid out when the moon went down," answered the Bar L foreman. "Easy to make sure, though. One of you boys go down and set a match to the kindling wood."

"Not on your ante," objected a voice strange to Bruce. "The dirty sheepherder didn't let out no holler when she slammed over. Nobody can't peach on the bunch if nobody don't savvy what's happened to him. Let's *vamose* our own selves."

"Don't know but what there's something in that, Al," admitted Lomax. "But Sid may as well stop and make sure it's all right. What

d'you say, Sid? You can catch the early train by taking Haines's short-cut up to the trail. Here's an extra twenty for luck."

Corveau's voice advertised his condition —

"Keep yer tain'ed gol'. All I ashk 's liq'id 'freshm'ts."

"Pass over your bottles, boys," purred Lomax. "Sid 's white. He'll be over the border before we happen into Grass Valley and discover what he's done to that sheepherding son of a rustler."

A maudlin assent from the fuddled drunkard, praise of his "squareness" from Lomax and the other flatterers, then the sound of hoofs.

Bruce began to grope farther in search of his rifle. He moved with caution, for he knew that a man of Corveau's type can shoot straight even when too drunk to talk or stand up.

The slowness of his search saved Bruce more than once from running against growths of cactus. His out-groping fingers alone suffered from the thorns. Several minutes passed before their tips touched the butt of his rifle. He eased the weapon gently out of the bush into which it had fallen, and began to creep toward the top of the arroyo bank.

Warily as he crawled up the slope, every two or three steps a twig snapped or his foot dislodged tiny slides of dirt. Each time he crouched

low and raised his rifle, waiting for the flash and roar of Corveau's revolvers. In the hush of the black night he felt certain that the man above must be hearing and heeding those little sounds of betrayal.

Inch by inch he crept upward, each moment expecting the shock of a bullet from one of the forty-fives. At last his groping hand felt the crumbled edge of the bank. He pushed up his rifle barrel and slowly straightened on his knees, ready to fire at the flash of Corveau's shot.

His eyes rose above the level of the bank. Before him were black objects, vaguely outlined in the starlight—the overturned stove, chair and big food tins of the shack. But all were so formless that any one of them might have been Corveau. Finger on trigger, he watched for a moment.

From the nearest dim lump came a snore. . . . The first act of the already intoxicated Corveau had been to empty the flasks of liquor left by his mates.

The sun had been up half an hour before its blistering rays roused the sleeper from his alcoholic stupor. His bleary eyes blinked several times, then widened in a sudden fixed stare.

Bruce saw that his prisoner had wakened. But he went on gathering up the food, which, in the

darkness, the hazers had done their utmost to kick over and scatter.

An ant crawled into Corveau's neck. The captive started to jerk up his arm. He discovered that his wrists were tied fast. From his hoarse throat came a sardonic chuckle.

"Roped and hogtied! And we thought he had *vamosed!*"

The laugh decided Bruce. No would-be murderer would have wakened in the power of his intended victim and seen anything humorous about the situation.

"Awake, are you? I've been debating whether to beat you up or take you to jail."

"It's your move. Go as far as you like," invited Corveau. "The joke's on me. But while you're framing up your torture you might say *whoa* to this dodgasted ant that's foxtrotting 'round my lily-white neck. And my head feels like an apple in the oven just 'fore it busts."

Bruce untied the hogging-string from Corveau's wrists and ankles. He turned away to pour a cup of coffee from the pot on the battered little stove.

"It's still hot," he said.

Corveau sat up and gulped the steaming black drink. He passed the cup back for more. When the last drop had been drained

from the coffee-pot he scowled down at the three empty flasks at his side.

"Why not vote dry?" suggested Bruce.

"I got what was coming to me." Corveau locked his hands over his splitting head. "Mr. March fired me body and soul—if you savvy what that means. . . . D'you want to hire a puncher—a *sober* puncher?"

As the brown-black eyes met Bruce's searching glance they gleamed with something else than their owner's mirthful derision of himself. Bruce held out his hand.

"I want a side pardner."

"To buck the Bar L?"

"Yes. They over-played their hand. I was going to pull out. After last night I can't. They'd take me for a quitter."

"Don't blame you. It's no more than fair, though, to wise you that Mr. March wasn't in on the deal last night. Just Bill's brilliant idee to run you off. He wouldn't object to getting hold of this section. Want me to ride herd on him and O'Keefe? The rest don't amount to shucks."

"If March does what is right there'll be no trouble. How many head of cattle carry the Box B?"

"He'll never let you run 'em on this range.

Better sell him the brand. Oughtn't to tell you that. It'll skin me out of my new job. But you've been white. . . . You might screw him up to twenty thousand dollars."

"We'll see about it. He doesn't own this land. At any rate, there'll be work here for you."

The frightful ache of Corveau's "hang-over" could not block a flashing boyish grin.

"When do we call on the Bar L?"

"You might go down and souse your head in the spring barrel while I saddle."

Corveau stood up and patted the black butts of his revolvers.

"A he-man—to get hitched as side-kick to a real he-man! Look here, Bruce, I'm an ornery cuss in liquor. If I get queasy, promise you'll give me a good kicking."

"There'll be no need. You've voted dry. . . . You know my name!"

"Didn't you introduce yourself to Miss Jo?"

Bruce turned away with an odd tightness in his throat. For all her snubbing of him, the girl had not forgotten his first name.

CHAPTER V

HARD DEALING

ONE rider on the south road would not have surprised Lomax. Sid Corveau was capable of coming back to pay Windy March a social call.

What troubled Lomax was the second rider. He took out his field glasses. . . . Yes, it was the big sorrel. Worse still, his rider and Corveau appeared to be on friendly terms.

Half a mile away, up the creek, Corveau grinned at his companion.

"I'll bet you two bits he beats us in. His mare sure can stretch when she gets started, eh?"

Bruce smiled, only again to become grave. Though hardly a year older than his new friend, he had bitter cause to take his business at the Bar L with seriousness. Corveau's name had not been branded with shame. He could be expected to make fun of anything.

The barn, corral, and bunkhouse all seemed

deserted. The visitors jogged past and on alongside the house. Alert-eyed and grinning with pleasant anticipation of trouble, Corveau spurred his horse ahead, around the corner. He need not have taken the precaution. The front veranda held only a family party.

Lomax stepped away from March and took a seat half behind his mother's rocker. March puffed hard at his pipe, but did not move. Josie rose from her new hammock.

"Oh, Sid! To think of your coming back after what dad said! I'd have tried to have him keep you, only——"

Sight of Bruce swinging his horse around beside Corveau's chilled the girl's friendly concern. She drew back toward the door.

"Hold on, Miss Jo," said Corveau. "We've come under flag of truce. You see how Ma Lomax is trying her best to keep Bill from turning his wolf loose. Mebbe you better stay and smooth down your pa."

March frowned inquiringly at Bruce. He had no relish for the banter of a discharged drunkard. Bruce was no less impatient to end the chaffing.

"Sid and a bunch of your boys called on me last night. Tipped my shack over into the arroyo."

"They did?"—March's anger blazed out sideways at his sullen-faced foreman. "What do you know about that, Bill?"

"We'll forget it, Mr. March," Bruce forestalled Lomax's hesitating reply. "The boys had to have their little joke. But there've been no bones broken. The shack needed a new roof, anyway. Only thing—one of the bunch fired low."

"Which one?"

Lomax had at last found his tongue.

"Must have been Sid. He was drunk."

"*Quien sabe,* Bill?" mocked Corveau. "Mebbe my new boss heard something more than those shots."

The big foreman subsided like a punctured tire.

March let out a deep rumble.

"Come on business, have you?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes." All embarrassment fell away from Bruce. He straightened up, keen and serious. "I have my land. The cattle are next in order."

The pipe of the big stockman sent out a succession of quick puffs.

"Well?"

"I want a round-up in order to——" Bruce's face crimsoned, but he went on steadily—"to cut

out all cattle that rightfully carry the Box brand."

"Who'll do the cutting?"

"You."

This time March was the one to sit up.

"What's that?"

"I mean you personally—not any of your men," qualified Bruce. "I'd like you to decide on every head about which there is the least doubt."

If anything, March's face became still harder. His gray eyes stared with cold suspicion.

"What's your game?"

"Needn't think I'm trying to smooth you down," countered Bruce. "I'm the nephew of Pete Haines, and I'm offering no apologies for it. But I know you'll make it a square deal. That will start me off clear. If you then want a fight, I'll be ready to go the limit."

March thumped his thick hand down upon his thigh.

"Jumping Jehosaphat! You've got your nerve, young man."

"Is it a go?"

"Nerve—and sand!" The gray eyes warmed with reluctant approval. "About the Box B, though, it can't be done. I couldn't do it myself."

"Why?"

"I couldn't be sure. Nobody could be sure. There's no telling how long Pete had been—operating. For all we know, he may have been at it for the last ten years—ever since he bought out old Billings' brand. We comb the hills for the wild cattle only every other year. He could have run Bar L cows up there and kept them long enough for the brands to heal."

"I see. Even given your own choice, you feel you might pass some that really belonged to yourself."

"That's the idea."

Bruce nodded.

"It's certain the cases are mixed. How about this? You know, or can find out, how many head he bought with the brand. Suppose you estimate the increase? His bank books show his sales. Figure his gains and losses on the original herd. I'll give you a free bill of sale for all over the number of head you think should now be in his herd."

No fairer compromise could have been offered. For all his cross-grained nature, March found difficulty in keeping up his resistance. But the sharing of his range had always been a thorn in his side. Billings had been a friend and em-

ployee. Not so Haines. They had quarreled for the last nine years.

Down thumped the thick fist, this time in anger.

"You don't play me! I've had enough of rustling on my range. Now I'm going to make a clean sweep."

Lomax so far forgot himself as to heave up his lanky body and voice his approval.

"That's talking, Uncle Wynn! We'll run him off the range and out of——"

"Ma, make Willyum sit down," appealed Corveau. "He's spoiling my view. I don't want to have to make a peephole through him."

Lomax slumped back into his chair. His outbreak passed unheeded by Bruce, whose blue eyes had darkened to blue-black. They returned March's pugnacious stare without a quaver.

"What do you propose?" he inquired.

To pick a quarrel with a man who insists on keeping his temper is difficult. March's hardset jaw relaxed a trifle.

"I'll buy your brand, cash down, twelve thousand dollars."

"Sounds small, Mr. March. How about twenty?"

"Wouldn't be a cent too much—if I knew your brand belonged on all the herd. That's

the devil of it. I don't cotton to buying back my own rustled steers and cows."

Bruce stood up.

"You have no proof except of whatever head were misbranded at the last. I can hold you yourself for rustling if you take a single cow whose brand you can't prove to be wrong. Do you want to fight it out?"

"Dammit!" roared the big man. "I'll fight you till——"

"Dad!" cried Josie. She ran from the doorway to fling a cajoling arm about her father's thick neck. "Please, dad! Think what it will mean if you buy him out and get rid of—of the old quarrel!"

"And Haines's kin!" added Mrs. Lomax. "Sid'll have to go too!"

"That's a consideration," admitted March. "I'll raise my offer to seventeen thousand, Stanhope. Take it or leave it."

"Cash down for my brand—taken."

Josie darted in for writing materials.

Her father frowned as he read the bill of sale written by Bruce.

"You don't mention your section."

"Nothing was said about land. You made your offer, and I have accepted it."

"But no papers have passed."

"Isn't the word of Wynn March good?"

The stockman purpled and flung open his checkbook. His temper put him at a disadvantage with a man of Bruce's cool, quiet type.

"A sight of good your section will do you with no brand or range!" he growled.

"Well, for one thing, I could run sheep in the hills. At least you'll not be able to accuse me of rustling. Good day, Miss March."

Josie's eyes flashed with a fine scorn.

"Sheep! I might have known it.—Sid, I'll give you a pink bow for your shepherd's crook."

"No, for my neck—with a little tinkly bell, Miss Jo," begged Corveau. He grinned as he jingled past Lomax. "D'you know, Bill, it's good luck starting a flock with a black sheep, 'specially a hydrophobia lamb—like me? They just dote on biting coyotes."

March watched his visitors off with a grim smile.

"Cherk up, Bill," he rallied the glum Lomax. "I've got them corraled. They can't rustle or use my range."

"Yes, they're bound to go away," agreed Josie, the faintest note of wistfulness in her voice. "They won't run sheep. They can't. They're white men."

CHAPTER VI

A NESTER IS A NESTER

WELL along on the way to Grass Valley Bruce broke in upon his companion's doleful humming of a lullaby.

"What do you say we make it sheep, Sid?"

"You're the doctor. Sheep, skunks, or rattlers—suit yourself. But if you ask me, my guess is they'll rank sheep about six hundred per cent. the worst reptiles. Quick way to get action. *Baa!* at 'em, and they'll *Bah!* back."

"Well, I don't wish to declare war, but—"

"No need. One little woolly lamb this side of Ariquito will set Windy March to howling. It'll be war all right, *amigo.*" Corveau grinned with anticipation.

Bruce stared ahead along the dusty, glaring road.

"You don't savvy. I'm not hankering for war. But I'm not going to quit, either. I don't like sheep any more than you. Just mentioned

them at the Bar L to give March something to think about while we're flanking him."

"As how?"

Bruce gave a brief outline of his plans. At first Corveau looked disappointed. He failed to see any prospect of the kind of action he most enjoyed. But then he began to realize what the plans might lead to. He was chuckling when, at the arroyo, Bruce turned off up the trail to Ariquito.

By pushing his horse rather hard on the rough mountain trail, Bruce reached town in time to bank March's check and catch the northbound afternoon train. The third morning he returned with a loaded truck on a flat car. He drove the truck off through the Ariquito cattle-chute without disturbing the load that lay under the folds of a big wall tent.

Promise of double pay started the county surveyor off across the mountains, with Chico for pack horse. Bruce drove away on the forty-mile semi-circle of the Bar L road. The truck, though heavily loaded, made good time.

A little past mid-morning he approached the big shallow reservoir, or waterhole, which March had made by building a crib dam of logs and stones across the creek bed. A dry wash ran down to the head of the waterhole from a break

in the front ridge. As Bruce drove across the gravelly bed he saw the March touring car a little way up the wash. Beside it Josie March was dipping water from a spring.

He walked up to the car, swinging a canvas bucket. His approach won no slightest recognition from Josie. She went on filling her pail from the deepset spring barrel and emptying it into the kegs that sat in the tonneau of the car.

Without a word Bruce started to follow the girl's example, with a like air of absorption in the work. He dipped his bucket full and swung around to pour the water down the keg funnel.

Josie flared through her mask of pretense.

"I'll thank you not to put that in. We don't like our *olla aqua* flavored with mutton."

"But I'm not a sheepman yet. Sid is the only lamb I have—so far."

The girl's cheeks flamed scarlet.

"If you mean that you think I could ever—" His look of surprise checked the outburst. "Of —of course you see how ridiculous it is—the mere idea of it!"

He flung the water from his bucket upon the sun-scorched stones.

"Yes, Miss March, it's a joke—on me. You've made it clearer than ever that my nice little *pasear* down to this country has landed me in the

branding pen. It doesn't matter what I am myself. Pete Haines was my uncle. You do not trouble to look up my record. It's enough for you that my uncle did—what he did."

"Wait! That's not fair, Mr. Stanhope. I wasn't thinking of him. It's you yourself—going in for sheep! Isn't that enough?"

"I haven't done it yet, and I didn't say I would. It was only that I could."

"Could?—And you claim to be a cowboy!"

The brown eyes flashed indignation and scorn. Bruce faced them with grave inquiry.

"What would you suggest, then? Your father has me roped. I had to sell the brand to him, or take the chance of holding rustled cattle. You'd think a whole lot of me if I quit and *vamosed* the country, wouldn't you?"

"N-no," she admitted. "Not quit. Yet if you run sheep—Oh, can't you see? I'd have to despise you—and Sid. Besides, you couldn't. There'd be trouble. It's hard enough at the best for dad to get along with people. He'd go loco over sheep . . . and Sid is so quick on the draw!"

"Don't worry about him. If he keeps his word to stay dry, he'll not hunt for trouble—unless the Bar L starts the game."

"But sheep!"

"Well, what else can I do? No chance to buy another cow brand. I asked at Ariquito. All the same, if *you* say the word, there'll be no sheep."

Caught off her guard, Josie beamed with the joy of her great relief.

"Oh, thank you! I'm so glad. With Sid on your side, and dad gone wild over your sheep—the thought of what would happen!—But now of course it's all right. There'll be no danger, and—and it's pleasant to have good neighbors. Sid is such lively company."

"I'll tell him."

The dry irony won a smile from Josie.

"Who knows, Mr. Stanhope? You, too, may prove to be as gay."

"No need to tell you I want to be agreeable. It's now up to the Bar L. So far your father has had his say, and I've agreed. We squared all the old accounts. I'm now starting my own. I'll mind my business, and I expect the Bar L to mind its. If it does, you'll find me a good neighbor."

"But you and Sid will have nothing to do. I'll coax dad to take on both of you. Won't that be grand! He could let O'Keefe and another of the new ones go."

Bruce turned a half regretful look toward the

tent-covered load on his truck. He heaved a sigh.

"The woman tempts me—but I've already bitten off all I can chew. I'm going to dry farm."

"Why, that will mean throwing away your money. Some years there's not enough rain even for a good crop of grass.

"What of it? I have money to burn. Besides, there's Sid. I've hired him to work. You know, the devil finds work for idle hands."

Josie half turned to flash a saucy glance over her shoulder.

"Get thee behind me, Satan, and find work for yourself bailing water. May as well put in your time doing something useful, as to waste it ruining good grass sod."

"It's my land and money and seed. If I can't sell feed to your father, I can feed my corn and beans at home—start a chicken ranch."

This absurdity won a laugh from Josie. She returned to the filling of her water kegs. Bruce followed suit, his bucket no longer tainted with the odor of mutton. All too soon the water *garrumped* in the funnel and brimmed out upon the head of the last keg.

Bruce dipped another bucketful, put the cover and its holding stone over the spring barrel, and swung up on the running board of the car be-

side the girl's shoulder. When she stopped at the road for him to get off she looked up at the big truck load.

"More seed than you'll harvest crop," she bantered.

"Not seed only. I'm moving in—to stay."

She drew off her glove to give him a friendly grip.

"A nester is a nester. But at least he's not a sheepman. *Adios.*"

The car lurched up out of the wash and shot away along the smooth road.

By the time the slower-moving truck chugged up to the ranch O'Keefe was driving the unloaded car on past the house to the barn. Josie had disappeared. But March came striding down from the veranda.

"Stop," he bellowed. The truck obeyed. "What's this 'bout your not going to run sheep? Backed down, have you?"

"Not that I know of, Mr. March. I said I could run sheep in the hills. Didn't say I would, did I?"

"Just trying to rile me, were you?"

"Wasn't it mutual?"

The cowman glowered.

"You know the fence law. Don't come whin-

ing to me for damages if my cattle prefer corn to grass."

"Don't lose any sleep over that, sir," and the truck roared and chugged away with its smiling driver.

CHAPTER VII

OFFENSIVE DEFENSE

IN the Grass Valley gap Sid Corveau sauntered up out of a grove of cottonwoods to meet the truck.

"Have you got the makings, buddy?" he greeted.

"Shouldn't wonder. How's cases?"

"Fine. Heap squaw work, ugh!"—Sid held up a pair of blistered palms. "Mebbe you've read about Hew of the Flying Chip. That's me. It's been all post haste and no postpone. Reckon I've earned my salt, boss. 'Nough cut for half a mile of fence."

While he rolled cigarettes from the large package of "the makings" handed over to him by Bruce, the truck rolled on up the creek. The wrecked shack still lay at the foot of the arroyo bank.

The wall tent was set up on the shack site, and a quantity of supplies stowed within. When, in the heat of noon, the county surveyor came jog-

ging down-trail, the remainder of the truck's load lay undisturbed, under a tarpaulin.

Half a day did not give time enough for the survey, which, in a sense, was never completed. Two corners of the section proved to be located on the unscalable upper cliffs of the front ridge. But section lines were staked where possible.

The surveyor was not afflicted with excessive dignity. For good and sufficient consideration he proved willing to help Corveau set posts. Like the county judge, he did not side with Windy March. One of Bruce's purchases had been a gasoline drill that could be adapted to digging postholes. With three hard-working men, plenty of barbed wire in the truck, and more than enough posts ready cut by Corveau, the first line of fence went up in rush order.

On the morning that the fourth strand of wire was stretched, Bruce hauled the end up the steep foot slope at one side of the gap. As he anchored it, like the other strands, to a point of rock, he saw a little cloud of dust out on the road at the bend of the front ridge. The cloud drifted nearer. He called down to the surveyor.

"Looks like company, *amigo*. Better fade. No need for you to get in bad with them."

The officer had his political fences to consider. He was out of sight, up the trail at the north

end of the valley, before the leisurely gait of the horses on the road brought them around into the gap. Bruce and Corveau had gone on driving staples.

The approaching riders suddenly spurred their mounts into a gallop. Corveau smiled. A line of white showed under the irises of his brown-black eyes.

"That looks like Willyum and Patrick. Oh, dear me! I do hope they ain't going to be real rude!"

"Easy, Sid. Don't play into the Bar L's hands by starting anything."

"Sure, boss. They can do the starting. I'll do the finishing. Bill's a fourflusher. But O'Keefe'll bear watching."

Near the fence builders the horse ridden by Lomax made a side whirl that brought him around on the far side of the other horse. The foreman swore at his animal and cried out angrily past O'Keefe's shoulder:

"What d'you mean, fencing up the valley?"

"How do you make that out, Mr. Lomax?" inquired Bruce. "I see no fence around the valley—only along part of one side of my section."

"It shuts us out of the valley, don't it?"

"Course it does," growled O'Keefe, without

for an instant shifting his surly gaze away from the smiling Corveau. "You fellers ain't got no license to put open range under fence."

"I've told you, I'm fencing my own land. It's private property. You and your outfit have warning not to trespass."

Lomax made an attempt to bluster like his step-uncle.

"Trying to bluff us, are you? Well, before we get through, you won't have enough fence to cage a canary. I'm going to report this to Uncle Wynn."

"You'll find the road going back better than it was coming," remarked Corveau.

He rolled and lighted a cigarette, seemingly unwatchful of O'Keefe. But the Bar L man rode off after his leader with no more than a scowl. Corveau chuckled.

"We beat 'em to it with the fence, and Pat figgers I can beat him to it on the draw. Now for the cyclone cellar."

"Three guesses on his first move," offered Bruce.

"One's enough, old timer. Windy is great for law and order—if it's on his side. Why should he risk lead and lawsuits by cutting wires, when he can use Pierson for a battering ram? But keep a stiff upper lip. Pierse won't be the first

sheriff I've made back up. If he draws on me —well, it's only one big ride to the Border."

"You wild cowboy! They haven't got us heading south yet. I aim to become a voter in this county. We'll hit the trail the other way."

The truck whirled them up to the tent. Their horses were grazing in the arroyo. Both were roped and saddled in the time a tenderfoot would have taken to come within throwing disstance of them.

When a top hand rides his horse out of a walk or jog, it is on a racing bet or urgent need. The surveyor was overhauled and passed at the fork of the trail. Though he made haste to follow, his outfit so hampered his horse that he did not reach Ariquito until more than two hours after the hurried young men rode their blowing horses down the steep west slope.

The pair had completed their other business in the town hall and elsewhere and were waiting for their fellow fence-builder. Another hour found them jogging up the back trail. From the first crest they saw a black beetle scurrying along the road from the north, trailed by a comet cloud of dust.

"You guessed it, Sid. He's coming in for a posse."

"Some dust he's kicking up!"—Corveau pat-

ted the neck of his horse. "Good thing he chewed it over and waited for dinner. No less that we moved suddenlike. We can take our own sweet time getting back. Pierse will lay over night at the Bar L. Too blasted hot for 'em to bust loose at us this evening."

Bruce pondered for several miles while Corveau wasted songs on the desert air. When at last dryness hoarsened his throat and he paused for a wetting, Bruce roused to speech.

"It's a pity, Sid. I'd give a good deal if I didn't have to buck him. Too bad he's one of the rule or ruin kind. Ten to one, he drove Uncle Pete into doing—what he did."

Corveau's glance shifted away over the cedar-topped heights. The cords of his throat twitched above his gay silk neckerchief.

"I've got a loose tongue . . . Mr. March'll bull dog you, but he'll do it in the open. He kicked me out. . . . If only he'll kick them others—land 'em plumb straddle in a bunch of cactus!"

Bruce heard only the first half of his companion's bitter murmur. His gaze and his thoughts were fixed ahead upon the future, peering through the rose-crystal of hope for the lovely young face of his enemy's daughter.

CHAPTER VIII

THE BLUFF CALLED

BACK in the valley they found time before nightfall to load the pieces of the old shack into the truck and move them to a site up the creek above Bruce's section.

By an hour after dawn the splintered walls had been patched together and set up. Over them Corveau started to build a roof-frame of cottonwood poles, to be topped with brush and dirt.

Bruce rode down-creek. He hardly had reached the gap when he sprang off to build a quick fire and throw on green leaves. The smoke signal brought Corveau to him as fast as his horse could run.

March and Sheriff Pierson were jogging up the road, backed by O'Keefe and five other Bar L cowboys. They found Bruce and Corveau quietly waiting for them on the inner side of the new fence. There was no exchange of courtesies.

"Mind your hands, Sid," warned Pierson. "This here is my posse. Every man's a deputy. Stanhope, you've fenced the Bar L's right of way into Grass Valley. You know I'm sheriff of this county. I'm here to bust through, in the name of the law."

Bruce smiled good-humoredly.

"No one has a right to resist the sheriff or his deputies in the lawful exercise of their duties."

"You're wise, backing up," commended Pierson. He nodded to March. "I told you all we need do was call his bluff, and he'd throw down."

The big stockman frowned over the fence at Bruce. He had not forgotten his previous experiences with the quiet nephew of Peter Haines.

"I'm not so sure, Pierse. The fence is still up."

The sheriff jerked a thumb at the Bar L men, all of whom sat watchfully eyeing Corveau.

"Two of you boys, get down with your wire cutters."

"Wait," said Bruce. "I want to explain——"

"Sew up your lip. I'm bossing this shindy."

Corveau affected to be abashed. He grinned and simpered.

"Oh, kind sir, please don't call my bluff too. All the hand I hold is a pair of sixes."

"You—son of a——" Pierson did not com-

plete the curse. He saw the widened under-rim of white in Corveau's eyes. "Good Lord, Sid. Don't be a fool. You know you can't bluff me."

"Course not. How could you think I could've thunk it? Only please won't you listen to my boss? That's a nice sheriff!"

Pierson went gray. March purpled. But not even O'Keefe moved a muscle. Bruce nodded cheerfully.

"Thanks for your attention, gentlemen. Let me remark first that I have taken legal advice on this situation. A sheriff and posse committing unlawful acts are law breakers. This is my land. The claim of Mr. March is a matter for suit in the courts—a civil case, not a criminal charge. The sheriff has no more right than any one else to break my close and trespass upon my land without a warrant or order of the court. I am in possession and—"

"That's your guess at the law," broke in March. "I demand entry to my range."

"I haven't fenced your range. The fence is on my section."

"You say it."

"So does the county surveyor. I have his stakes and certificates. For another thing, Grass

Valley is public land. You do not own a foot of it."

"It's part of the Bar L and Box B range. The two brands have used it for more than twenty years. It's all mine to use till it's homesteaded."

"All except my section and the creek land above that Sid has filed on."

March glared at Corveau.

"A thousand in cash," he roared. "A thousand for your relinquishment, and you clear out of the country. One nester is more than a plenty."

"But two's company," murmured Corveau. "Besides, I've voted dry. I need the water."

"About my own land, Mr. March," Bruce cut in. "I hold legal possession. I am going to hold out all trespassers. That includes officers who try to break in without due warrant of law. I'm making no threats. I want to be a good neighbor. My stand is based on the law, which I can't believe Mr. March wishes to break. Now, sheriff, what lawful right have you to cut my fence? Seems to me I've heard that fence-cutting is a crime in some states."

Pierson slewed his grim gaze around to his companions.

"He's been wised up, Mr. March. You'll need a court order."

"*Muchas gracias,* sheriff," said Bruce. "*Bueno!* It's not every officer who knows the law or who keeps it. Wish we had time to make a gate, I'd ask you all to come up and look over our layout. Sid has his homestead cabin pretty well started. Here, O'Keefe, lend me your nippers. I'll cut a gate."

"No, you don't," exploded March. "You can't soft-soap me. When I come through your fence, it'll be because I want to, not because I'm asked."

"Then I'll not ask you. But I'll be glad if my neighbors will pay me friendly visits without waiting to be asked."

The exasperated cattleman jerked his horse around and spurred him into a lope. Pierson and the rest of the party followed at a sharp trot.

"Aw, shucks! All the chances for fun we've had, and not even just one little pop of a firecracker!" said Sid.

Bruce's smile sobered.

"Look here, Sid. I want you to keep on siding with me. But I mean what I said. We shoot only in self-defence, and even then more to help the doctor than the undertaker."

"Orders!" Corveau saluted. "Now let's go hunt hayseed."

They returned up-creek to resume work on Corveau's shack.

Next day they started a line of fence along the north side of their sections. The supply of wire was short, but the stand of post timber in the arroyo needed only the ax. A side-line fence would block any chance of the Bar L driving cattle up the trail from the plains and down the creek through the north corner of the valley. The two worked hard.

Half a mile of posts had been set, and the last spool of wire was being strung, when Corveau sighted the first visitor since the day of the posse.

"Behold the Song of the Burro," he punned.

Bray, the county recorder, trotted his horse down-trail, trying to rise to the gait, Eastern fashion, and only partly succeeding. Near the workers he held up his hand in the Indian peace sign.

Corveau's fingers twitched. "That dude lid——"

"Don't you—don't you shoot," quavered Bray. "I haven't come to serve you, Sid. It's Stanhope—and it's only a civil suit."

Bruce took the legal document hastily handed over by the visitor and looked at the first typewritten page.

"So Mr. March has brought suit against me?"

"Then it ain't a civil suit, seeing as how it's Windy's," argued Corveau. "'Tain't possible for him to be civil to anybody he's ag'inst. How'll we massacre Ollie?"

"Choke him with chuck. Come and get it, Bray."

The padlock on the gate across the trail did not tend to quiet Bray's nerves, nor did Corveau's insistence that the visitor ride ahead of him. Once through, and the gate locked behind him, Bray half tumbled from his saddle to crowd up beside Bruce.

"I—I trust you understand it's not personal, Mr. Stanhope. Someone had to serve the complaint, and as I wished to call on Miss March, they persuaded me to——"

"Of course. Which will you have—ham or bacon?"

At the end of the noon meal Bruce relieved the lingering uneasiness of the visitor by proposing to ride back to town with him.

"This lawsuit business is out of my line, Mr. Bray. Sooner I get a lawyer riding herd on it for me the better."

"I shall be delighted to accompany you, Mr. Stanhope," Bray hastened to agree. "After all, my call upon Miss March perhaps should be postponed."

On the trail, away from Corveau, he talked freely, telling many stories about Windy March's disputes and controversies. In the end, the stubborn, hot-headed cattleman had always won out. Once his enmity was roused, he never quit until his opponent submitted or was beaten down.

"But in his way, he's square, Mr. Stanhope. Give in, and he'll buy you out. He'll pay what your land is worth."

"Maybe it's worth more to me than to him," parried Bruce. "I'll know better after I've used it a year or two."

"You can't, though. Don't you see? You can't. Your fence—he has to get into the valley. You have got to sell out to him."

"Well, if I must, I suppose I must. . . . What commission do you get from him for acting as capper in his game? Is he to pay you cash, as well as re-elect you?"

Bray straightened in his saddle, with a very good show of offended dignity.

"I'll give you to understand I'm doing this for friendship. I am a friend of the family."

The reply restored Bruce to good-humored tolerance. Hope of winning Josie March had been too much for the man. Love for such a girl might well cause any man to risk all else in the world.

CHAPTER IX

DAWN RIDERS

ARIQUITO could boast of more than one lawyer. Bruce retained the other one. His plan had been to rush the case to a quick decision. The lawyer urged exactly opposite tactics. Delay would mean more fees to himself. Incidentally it promised great difficulties to March.

The man of law spoke of a demurrer to the complaint, of gaining added time in which to plead, of postponements and continuances that probably could be obtained—all the technical methods of dragging out litigation. Possession is nine points of the law. As long as the case remained undecided the opposition would have no legal right to break down the fence.

"I'll take your say for it," Bruce at last agreed. "Go ahead and hit the long trail with them. *Sabe Dios*—before you get to the end of the drive I may have time to round-up something else."

He went to send off a telegram and to bargain with the storekeeper for a quantity of fence wire, price including delivery at Grass Valley.

A week later Josie March loped from the Bar L ranch house on one of her frequent dawn rides. She started with Lomax, who had orders to inspect the range down to where, thirty miles away, the creek overflowed from the last waterhole into an alkali sink. For two months the dwindling stream had failed to trickle beyond the second waterhole, midway downstream. There was need to make certain whether the lower hole would dry up before the coming of the fall rains.

Josie's plan was to ride out for a few miles, with her highly pleased companion, then turn back in time to get home before the withering heat of midday. But a most unexpected thing happened just above the first water hole.

"Look!" exclaimed Josie suddenly, and Lomax followed the pointing of her gloved hand. A long, dark mechanical monster was crawling up into the red glare of sunrise out of the wash above the waterhole.

"Mighty funny," he muttered. "'Taint hot enough yet for a mirage . . . and that sounds like the chugging of an engine."

He started to get out his field glasses. But Josie spurred her horse into a gallop. He raced after her.

They soon came close enough to make out the wheeled segments behind the tractor head of the slowly advancing monster—gang plow, corn planter, and three heavily loaded trailers. A man on a big sorrel horse rode up out of the wash to follow the train.

"Stanhope!" The name spat from Lomax's lips as if poisoned.

"No, that's not Bruce," corrected Josie. She smiled teasingly at her companion. "Don't you see? He's driving."

As they galloped up alongside the tractor, Bruce stopped the engine. With the hushing of its roar he swung around on his seat and smilingly lifted his hat to Josie.

"Buenos dias, señorita."

"What d' you think you're doing with all this here hardware?" demanded Lomax.

"Seems to me I'm trying to move it," replied Bruce. "Some drive, I'll tell the world. Didn't pull into the wash till after dark last night."

The meaning of the tractor train dawned upon the rather slow mind of Lomax.

"Own up. You're going in for large-scale farming."

"Isn't that better than sheep, Bill?" asked Josie.

"Not by a darn sight, it ain't. It's bad enough him fencing us out of Grass Valley. Now he's aiming to tear up the pasture. He can't deny it without lying."

"I'm not trying to very hard," replied Bruce.

Lomax paused to peer back at the man on the sorrel horse, who had stopped beside the tail end of the train. The smile was fading from Josie's lovely face.

"Mr. Stanhope," she queried, "you have the right to do as you wish with your land. But what right have you to fence us out of the valley?"

"I take it, you mean real right, not the mere law of the case," said Bruce. "We'll leave that end to the lawyers. What's left is this—the fence is on my land. I'm going to use the land for corn. I can't have stock eating and trampling my crops."

"But you can't raise anything down here without irrigation, and the creek never runs more than enough to fill the waterholes—most of the year."

"I'm not so sure. There's millet and Papago corn and other crops that need only a short

spell of rains. At any rate, it's worth trying, if only to——"

"That ain't Sid on your sorrel," broke in Lomax. "Now you looky here, young feller. This has gone far enough. Just you circle 'round, short as you can, and head back for town."

Bruce did not seem to see the foreman's hand draw back to his hip.

"You're right, Mr. Lomax. Sid is safe at home. That's only a garage hand I hired to see I didn't get stalled coming out. But why should I turn back? Only nine miles now to the valley, and an open road ahead."

"That road is shut—to you."

"A public road?"

"Not where it run 'cross the Bar L land."

Bruce nodded.

"All right, *amigo*. Your boss's holdings are strung along the creek in quarter sections. Show me your corners, and I'll drive outside your lines. Solid tires don't mind cactus."

"You'll head the other way!" blared Lomax.

"Don't be in a hurry about drawing," urged Bruce. "There's a lady present. We have no wish for her to see anything unpleasant. Miss March, let me suggest that you ride on into the wash. I expect to go ahead."

Lomax hesitated. Could the young fellow have armed himself? Would he have spoken so coolly if he were not quick on the draw?

The moment of vacillation gave Josie time to swing out of her saddle and spring upon the tractor. She crowded into the seat beside Bruce and reached for the levers.

"Where's your starter?" she asked. "I've always wanted to run a tractor."

The foreman's hand jerked away from his hip. It thrust out as if attempting to stretch the many feet to the tractor and draw the girl away.

"You—Jo—come off there! What'll your pa say? And ma too!"

"I'll tell you when I know. Good-bye."

"But, Jo, as foreman I can't let this cheeky cuss——"

"You don't have to. I'm driving this tractor. It's a valuable lesson. Perhaps some day I'll be a farmer's wife. *Quien sabe?*"

"Hope so," murmured Bruce.

Josie blushed ravishingly. The face of Lomax turned sallow gray. The situation was both awkward and dangerous, for Lomax seemed to consider he had a strong claim on Josie's affections. With a quick twist the girl slipped out of her predicament.

"So you see, Bill, you may have to study agriculture."

"Well—if that's what you're driving at. . . . But you want to cull out this feller right here and now. Your pa——"

"That's for dad to say. Don't let us keep you from your work, Bill. Trot along, and please tell the garage man to lead in my bay."

The engine of the tractor whirred into a roar that sent the horses dancing sideways. Lomax savagely spurred his mare and plunged away toward the wash.

Within a minute Josie had the tractor under control. It pulled steadily on along the road, trailed by its noisy train. Her brown eyes sparkled.

"Drop your hat overboard and see if we're moving."

"Four miles an hour. . . . Miss Jo, won't you please quit? It was all right your getting rid of Mr. Lomax. I didn't want to hurt him. But neither do I want to get you in bad with your father."

"If you don't like present company, get off and walk, Mr. Stanhope."

Bruce laughed and gave himself over to the joy of the moment. To sit like this, close beside her, was more than he had so far dared even to hope.

Every time when the sway of the tractor joggled her slim shoulder against his arm he tingled from the delicious contact. . . . Somehow that lone freckle near the tip of her adorable little nose redoubled her loveliness.

They talked gaily of such unromantic things as carburetors, motor oil, transmission gear, tires. The distant hills still glowed with a soft glamor of sunrise rose-tints. The young couple shut their eyes to the storm that threatened ahead in the ranch veranda.

The tractor was still a good fifty yards from the house when March came striding out to meet it. Josie waved to him and to her aunt, who glowered from her rocker in the shaded veranda.

"Look, dad—Aunt Hetty! Maybe I'm not a buster. But who says I can't drive?"

"You'll drive your pa distracted!" shrilled back Mrs. Lomax.

The term struck Bruce as far from appropriate. Flurry had no part in March's wrath. He thrust out a passionate finger at his daughter.

"Get down from there."

She obeyed, trembling more from mortification than fear.

"Oh, dad, please. Why can't you be friends with Bru—Mr. Stanhope. I know he'd meet

you half way. If only you go at him right, I feel sure he'll be fair about the fence."

"Fair—nothing!" rumbled March.

Bruce met the big man's scowl with his good-humored smile.

"Miss Jo is a pretty good guesser, Mr. March. I stand ready to give you a hundred-yard driveway across the corner of my section—*when you come and ask me for it.*"

The offer had an effect about as soothing as a goad jabbed into the flank of an angry bull. March bellowed.

"When I ask a favor of you, hades'll be an icehouse!"

"That seems to bear out what my law sharp told me," remarked Bruce. "He said my fence is legally termed a fixture.—Good-bye, Miss Jo."

The tractor roared; the whole train clanked into motion. March grasped Josie's arm and led her into the house.

CHAPTER X

THE CUTTERS

A WIRE gate was made in the gap fence and padlocked as soon as the tractor pulled through. By noon Bruce and the garage mechanic were ready to begin plowing.

Three feet or more of fine loam covered the hardpan of the flat valley floor below the side slopes. The almost total absence of any other growth than grass on the great stretch of level ground saved loss of time in grubbing roots.

With the big gang plow hitched to his tractor, Bruce soon found himself able to break fifteen acres a day, singlehanded. . . . Nor was this all. With mechanical accuracy, his trailing seeder planted corn in the bottom of the furrows as fast as the six plowshares turned over the sod. The dry soil proved to be so crumbly that no harrowing was needed.

At the end of a week Corveau laid off from his fence building long enough to take the garage mechanic home over the trail. He came back

without so much as a single drink of liquor, but with a roll of insulated wire and word that the Bar L felt fretful over the prospect of legal delays.

"Somebody dropped me a hint they may turn their wolf loose soon," he hopefully wound up his report. "May get action, after all."

"Let them do the starting, Sid. It's all I ask of you."

Sid returned to his drilling of post-holes, and Bruce to the tractor. But each night they bedded down in a clump of chaparral near the gap fence line, and took turn about on watch. The Bar L, however, seemed to be in no hurry to make any move.

By the end of the month all the fences were up, and nearly a section had been plowed and planted—four hundred acres on Bruce's land and half as much on Corveau's. Dry farming requires wide-set seed. Bruce still had corn left to keep him busy.

Corveau's taste for tractors was a minus quantity. He voted himself a rest and proceeded to lie about at ease. Yet he had a method in his loafing. Though he dozed most of the day, he kept watch at night.

Bruce went on plowing and gave little heed to the doings of his companion. He believed

that the Bar L had settled down to wait for a decision in court.

But Corveau would not give up hope. Early one evening he came up-creek with a flame of delight in his brown-black eyes.

"Took a look from the side of the gap this aft," he reported. "Big bunch of cows in sight."

"What of it?"

"Too many head for just happen-so. They're being drifted up from the lower range."

"Miss Josie said something about a chance of their lower hole going dry. That was more than a month ago."

"Which the same makes my prognostication a dead cinch, buddy-kins. Bill was fool enough to overstock this end of the range early in the season. They're running short of grass. Think they've got to bust into the valley. Oh, boy! I smell powder."

Bruce's face became as stern as Corveau's was gay.

"He's her father, Sid. But he has my offer. That was enough. He's not going to ride me."

"Buddy, you done your duty by him. Just happens, he's one of the bull-headed kind that don't like coals of fire heaped on 'em. As for him getting out a please-thank-you, he'd choke to death first."

On the way down-creek Bruce made sure that his rifle was as ready for use as Corveau's. In the brush of the creek bed he whipped out an automatic pistol and bowled over a cottontail as it scurried across a narrow strip of bare bank. Corveau grinned approval.

"Not so worse for a *hombre* who don't pack a gun."

"Bought it for that last trip from town," explained Bruce. "I couldn't afford to let them sidetrack my train. There was my car wrangler, besides. Had to be sure they wouldn't bother him. He wasn't in on our local muss."

Corveau picked up the rabbit and looked at the bullet hole through its head.

"*Huh.* Me wasting worry over my poor defenseless boss. You've showed me all right."

"But I wasn't trying to show off," remonstrated Bruce. "It's only we need fresh meat."

"That's no lie. I'd be ashamed to look a hog in the face. One of us better jog up into the hills to-morrow for venison—if so be there's another to-morrow coming to us."

Bruce did not smile over the lightly spoken qualification. If the Bar L was in truth about to strike, the defenders of the fence might not see another sun. Let a fight be started, and some at least of March's men would shoot to kill.

"They've been waiting for the dark of the moon," went on Corveau. "They'll figger that if we're watching at all, it'll be at the gate. It's dollars to doughnuts, they'll cut the south half of the fence and stampede the herd through over there. Here we are. Bed yourself. I'll attend to Br'er Rabbit."

"You're sure the battery is all right?"

"Tested her just before leaving."

The bare ground under Bruce's blankets was no harder than the average camp bunk, and he had put in a long day. But he did not fall asleep with his usual readiness. He felt as certain as Corveau that the Bar L would attack before dawn. The probability filled him with an inquietude that he could not down.

This uneasiness had no relation to his personal danger nor to the chance that others might be killed. He had the right to defend his property against violent invasion. His only concern was over the after effects.

To win would mean hardening March's enmity. To quit at this stage of the game—to knuckle under to March—would mean loss of his self respect.

On the other hand, there was Josie to be considered. If March were killed or wounded, she would suffer—and the thought of causing her

grief or pain was unbearable. March was no coward. He probably would lead his men.

Corveau had given his promise. But would he keep it? Could he? However good his intentions, would he be able to hold to them, once bullets began to whizz? To him shooting meant only pleasant enjoyment—fun!

There was no chance to ask him for a renewal of his promise. As darkness came on, he had changed from boots to Apache moccasins, crawled under the fence, and stolen noiselessly away down the creek bed.

Close upon midnight the unbroken hush of the desert at last calmed Bruce's milling thoughts. Hour after hour had passed without the slightest sign that the Bar L intended to attack. He told himself that he was a fool to worry over what might never happen. Soothed by the thought, his weary brain relaxed. He drowsed off.

A tapping on his hand half roused him. He started to turn over. The voice of Corveau whispered close to his ear:

"They're coming."

He grasped his rifle and crept after Corveau up the south bank of the arroyo. Near the top Corveau crawled through the fence and disappeared in the blackness. Bruce felt under the

edge of the bank until he found an insulated wire. One slide brought his fingers to a small metallic object.

Even up on the open level the starlight was too faint to show any forms against the black background of the ridge end. The thud of hoofs might have been heard several yards away, but not the tread of men afoot, moving with stealth. Bruce leaned against the fence and put his ear to a wire.

A minute passed—two minutes—five. Then along the taut fence wire came a slight tremor, followed by a sharp click. Bruce snapped the electric switch held ready in his hand.

From the truck, hidden in a thicket fifty feet away up the creek bed, the current of its heavily charged battery came darting through the insulated wire. The truck lamps, in a tree that over-topped the arroyo bank, shot their brilliant shafts of light out along the fence line.

Quick as the on-flash of a motion picture, the wire cutters leaped into clear view out of the darkness. The nearest man was a little more than a hundred yards away. He stood at the fence, half bent, reaching out to cut the second wire. Another man had not quite reached the

fence. A few yards behind them followed two guards with drawn pistols.

The sudden glare of light struck all four motionless with bewilderment. After the sideward jerk of their heads to face the lamps, they stood as if paralyzed. The guards were Lomax and O'Keefe.

Bruce fired his rifle along the inner side of the fence. With a yell, the men in front dropped their wire clippers and ran. At the same instant O'Keefe blazed away at the lamps with both of his revolvers. Four swift shots—then he spun around sideways as if twisted between giant fingers. From down the arroyo came the sharp roar of Corveau's rifle.

Still reeling from the shock of the bullet, O'Keefe dropped the revolver out of his left hand to clutch his right shoulder. His other revolver already lay on the ground. Lomax remained transfixed, his pistol half raised. *Crack!* from Corveau's rifle. The steeple-crowned hat flipped from the head of Lomax. Down went his pistol—up went his hands.

"'Night, Pat. Call again," said Corveau.

The implied permission to leave sent the disarmed pair hastening off down the gap toward the longed-for cloak of darkness outside the lamp glare. But as they went hurrying, Bruce

pulled a string. One of the lamps swung around so that its brilliant wedge of light followed the retreating pair. It disclosed two mounted men waiting with their horses. Lomax shouted before they could take flight. O'Keefe had begun to lurch and stagger like a drunken man. The others rode forward and helped him mount.

Corveau strolled back to the fence, humming a lullaby.

"How about O'Keefe?" questioned Bruce.

"Him? Sure, one tough old bird is Pat. Willyum would have slumped first pop. Me—I obeyed orders, boss. Steel bullet high up under his collarbone. Pat'll soon be out of hospital."

"All right. No sign of March. He may not be in on this, any more than on the shack tipping."

"Believe what you like, buddy, but keep your eye peeled. Suppose Windy didn't lay out this play. That's no sign he won't blow up a cyclone over losing it. Happens I know him better than you."

"I can't believe it," declared Bruce, his gaze on the slowly departing riders. "Another such move as this will mean killing. March will not go that far."

CHAPTER XI

ROPED

AT sunrise Bruce walked out along the fence. He brought back two wire-clippers, Lomax's pistol and hat, and O'Keefe's revolvers. After taking down the lamps and coiling in the insulated wire, he wakened the peacefully snoring Corveau.

"The herd is scattering down-creek, Sid. Been turned loose. We'll ride up in the truck. Can't play the lamp trick twice."

"No need. Next time it won't be a case of shooting to miss the bullseye. More fun, anyhow, aiming at the other man's gun flash. Just as well to get your cart out of the arroyo. Looks kind of lowering over west."

The truck had to go only a few yards to reach the old Grass Valley round-up road-crossing of the arroyo. After breakfast Bruce rode off for venison. He went by way of the trail to get a look down upon the Bar L range before striking back into the mountains.

By mid-forenoon the heat in the tent became unendurable. Corveau had been trying to sleep. He turned out and saddled his horse to ride the half mile up to his homestead shack. But, once mounted, innate wariness led him to decide on going around by way of the lower fence.

First look out of the gap showed only a few head of cattle, well down the creek. Then he saw a rider coming up the road—coming fast. He started to reach for his rifle, checked himself, and swung off to unpadlock the gate.

Josie's racing horse was close upon Corveau before she jerked him to a stop. For a moment she was too breathless with excitement and indignation to speak. She sat panting, her cheeks aflame and her eyes flashing with scornful reproof.

"My, my!" admired Corveau. "You sure look mighty pretty, Miss Jo, when you get downright mad."

"Don't you dare speak to me! Aren't you ashamed? Where's your boss?"

"Yes'um, awfully. But what about? What've I done this time?"

"What haven't you?—you or vour boss? One of you almost killed Bill!"

"Now, Miss Jo, own up. Don't you think Bill mebbe piled it on a bit regarding his in-

juries? That hat of his'n is considerable tall. Come up to the tent and I'll show you the holes. Mebbe the top of his hair got parted. He's wearing it long, and I guess it kind of stood up just then."

"Oh, Sid! . . . But it's not funny—not the least bit! O'Keefe was really shot and——"

"He got into action first—plugged straight at us 'fore I ripped loose. I put it high. Don't tell me he's hurt bad."

"Then you did that too? . . . Just the same, your side fired first! And it's you and your boss who're to blame for it all. Nothing could have happened if it hadn't been for this horrid fence. I'm going to make him open a driveway. Where is he?"

Corveau faced about to point toward the cañon.

"Up on top, there or thereabouts—looking for meat. Them clouds're banking thick. Wait, let me loan you my slicker."

The offer passed unheeded. Josie had put her bay into a lope. As Corveau closed and padlocked the wire gate he addressed his indifferent horse:

"What d'you know about that, boy? Windy sure can gum things up. First old Pete, and now as white a man as ever was—not to speak

of her. Guess it's up to me to see he gets a square deal, if I have to clean the whole bunch."

Josie was already well up the creek. Her eyes had fixed in amazement upon the immense stretches of plowed field. She had expected to see a few acres of broken ground. Here was a great tract—all the level ground on the north side of the arroyo. Only a narrow strip for roadway had been left between the bank and the border of the furrows.

In passing, she noted that the tent had taken the place of the old Haines' shack. Further along her gaze sharpened as it followed the line of the fences. Corveau's homestead had not been chosen at haphazard. It straddled all the creek bed in the valley above the Haines section. The north and south line fences ran across from ridge to ridge, shutting off all access to the water from outside the enclosed land.

By the time Josie reached the gate in the mouth of the little cañon she had worked herself back into a state of hot indignation. Heedless of the black clouds that were thickening on the mountains to the west, she rode up the now dry bed of the cañon as fast as her horse could foot with safety the water polished ledges.

They came out into the old lake bed of the walled valley above the cañon. The reeds had

all been browned to a crisp by the many months of drought. Even the willows drooped under the pitiless downbeat of the desert sun.

But a deep rumbling boom brought Josie's gaze up to the black thunderheads on the heights. The clouds were rolling nearer. Vivid streaks of lightning flashed aslant their sullen front. For the first time the girl realized her danger.

Too late now to take flight back down the cañon. In all the lower part of the valley no place offered where her horse could climb more than a few feet above the level bottom. She spurred him into a race against time, straight for the head of the flat.

The bay was both surefooted and fast. He went crashing through the willows and tall rushes, leaping driftwood logs and dried-up bog holes. But the clouds had already overspread all the upper watershed of the creek. Like gigantic bags, pierced by the lightning and burst open by the jar of the thunder, they poured out a sudden black torrent of rain.

All too well Josie knew how the water would rush down the steep rocky slopes, little hindered by the scant vegetation—how the thousands of small torrents, meeting in the creek bottom, would swirl into a devastating flood.

Her spurs stung the straining flanks of the

bay as she had never before roweled a horse. Her fear-darkened eyes searched the sides of the valley with a desperate scrutiny. Ahead, to the right, the slope seemed a little less steep. She swerved her sprinting horse. If only they could reach that possible ascent in time!

Up the rock ledges above darted her anxious glance. A man was rushing down the steep pitch of the mountain at reckless speed. He leaped from rock to rock, dodged a growth of wicked-thorned collas, checked a headlong plunge by plowing through a sagebrush and barely saved himself on the edge of a twenty-foot cliff by landing feet first against the post-like stem of a giant cactus.

As he scrambled sideways to a break in the cliff Josie flung out her hand to him in frantic appeal. Her scream pierced above the heavy booming of the thunder:

"Bruce! Bruce, take care!"

He pointed up the valley, waved his coiled rope, and bounded on down the ledges. She cast a sideward glance over her bent shoulder——

Around the first bend of the V-shaped upper valley dashed a great brown wall—a liquid avalanche of water, dirt, gravel, stones.

The ridge side was now only a few yards away. Though wheezing from his mad race up the

flat, the bay rushed the lower rise with no slackening of his swift stride. But the cloudburst flood was coming with terrific velocity. The curve of the valley bed hurled the swirling liquid mass aslant toward horse and girl.

A bank cut by an old-time flood rose steeply before the bay. Josie put him to it at the sharpest angle she thought he could climb. The high-reared floodhead already had come frightfully close. It seemed literally to spurt at her.

Down over her upraised arms whipped the loop of Bruce's rope. As it jerked taut about her waist, his yell rang in her ears:

"Climb! climb!"

A heave on the rope dragged her up out of the saddle. Swung over against the slope, she twisted about to gain foothold. Bruce hauled at the rope with all his strength. The girl had only to keep her hands and feet scrambling on the dirt and rocks.

Below her the roaring flood thudded against the bank. It gouged the earth and stones from under the hoofs of the horse. He screamed and toppled over into the brown swirl. Down he went, overwhelmed by the weight of that torrent quicksand. Even a grizzly would no less quickly have been dragged under and smashed by the rolling boulders on the bottom.

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Bruce did not stop hauling in until Josie's hands came within his reach. He grasped them and swung her upon the ledge beside him. Safety brought her pause in which to realize the closeness of her escape from a mangling death. She flung her arms about Bruce and clung to him like a terror-stricken child.

For a while he was himself too overcome to more than pat her quivering shoulder and mutter incoherent sounds meant to be soothing. His eyes were fixed upon the dirty torrent that swirled higher and higher up the bank.

It had been touch and go. A delay of three or four seconds, and the girl in his arms would have been down under that merciless flood—crushed, battered. He pressed her head closer to him, to make certain that she could not see the ugly torrent.

But her fear did not long continue. Her arms soon loosened their clutch of his body. She attempted to draw away.

"I'm—not frightened—now," she murmured. "Let go. I'll not fall."

Her face had gone from white to scarlet. Bruce at once stepped clear and began to coil his rope. He hastened to look at the sky.

"Storm seems to be hanging back on the

higher hills," he remarked. "Just as well, though, to get you up to my slicker."

Paying out the rope as he went, he climbed to a point of rock where he could pull without danger of slipping. All that Josie had to do was to keep her feet. Two more pulls brought them up on easier ground. He at last permitted her to take off the loop.

They came by an upward slant to where his horse stood cropping the dry tufts of scattered bunchgrass. Beside him they turned about to look up the valley at the booming thunderstorm on the higher ridges.

The rain had not lessened in violence. If anything, its deluge was pouring down harder than ever to swell the flood in the stream bed. All the old lake flat was now under water. Yet not a drop had fallen on the near slopes and crests. The rocks and cedars stood dusty and arid in the burning heat of the sun.

Josie drew her hand across her eyes and looked up into the grave face of her rescuer.

"Oh, Bruce!—And to think I came to scold you!"

"Scold away."

"But after—this!"

"O'Keefe isn't seriously hurt, is he?"

"No, it's—it's everything! Dad didn't know

beforehand what they planned to do. But now he'll have to stand back of them. Of course you'll sue the Bar L."

"Will I?"

"You'll not? Oh, Bruce! . . . But that doesn't take the fence away, and as long as it's there you know dad can't budge."

"I've met him half way. He's welcome to the drive through that I offered, any time he asks for it. I can't give ground an inch more. If I did he would despise me."

"I might, too—instead of—of——"

"Josie! You can't mean——?"

She faced him, rose-pink from throat to forehead, but with no flinching in her clear eyes.

"I'm glad you love me, Bruce. You can guess why. It's because I love you, dear."

CHAPTER XII

OBLIGATIONS

WORDS failed Bruce. He had hoped that some day, if he could prove himself a success and make peace with her father, he might have a chance. But a miracle had happened—a blissful unbelievable miracle.

The flashes of lightning and jarring booms of thunder died away. Emptied of their great mass of water, the clouds brightened as the sun-rays pierced their shining layers. They began to drift southward, slowly dissolving into thin air. The last wisp of white vapor vanished and left only the lilac-blue haze of a cloudless sky scorched by the fierce sun glare.

Bruce drew in a deep breath.

"Gone . . . but it gave you to me, Jo."

"You helped, didn't you?"

He smiled and again became thoughtful.

"Half of what your father paid me I've spent —truck, tractor, implements, seed, fencing. If I make a crop, all well and good. If not, what

then? Sheep of course are out of the question."

"I don't see why," was the girl's astonishing reply. She added as she met his puzzled glance. "I mean, if dad refused to be reasonable. Grass Valley would graze a real flock—ten or twelve thousand head, if they were kept up in the hills during the rains."

"No, I couldn't do it—not even for you, Jo. He's your father. No sheep for ours. I might be able to buy a cattle brand—one that wouldn't allow any misunderstandings."

The allusion brought a flush into his lean tanned cheeks. Josie drew up his hand to press it against her cheek.

"Dad is going to be hard to manage. Let me try first, my way."

"Good luck!"

Again a long silence. Then Josie sprang to her feet.

"They know I rode up-creek. That flood—dad may worry."

She could easily have mounted the sorrel with the stirrup hop, but thoughtfully allowed Bruce the privilege of a hand up into the saddle. He would not start until he had shortened the stirrups for her.

"Chico is gentled. But we'll have to take some jump-offs."

The route ran along the ridge crest more than half way to the head of the cañon. The flat of the walled valley still remained a lake of muddy waters, though much of the flood had already gushed roaring out through the rocky cleft of the gorge. Bruce noted with surprise the height of the fresh dark watermark on the cliffs. Josie saw only the turbid expanse of water beneath which, somewhere, lay the body of her bay.

The sorrel horse easily kept pace with his master, even when they came aslant over to the steep pitch of the ridge into the valley. A mount that has run wild horses in rough country must be surefooted. Chico picked his way down the shelf ledges and leaped the four and five foot jump-offs with the readiness of a goat. He was never more than a few feet behind Bruce all the way down to the bottom of Grass Valley.

The chance that a party might follow Josie from the ranch had led Corveau to remain at the gate. Yet looking back all the way across the two-mile width of the valley, he made out the tiny figures descending the inner ridge. The one horse meant trouble. He met the couple near the upper end of the plowed ground.

"Looks like you found him, Miss Jo," he hailed. "Wouldn't have thought, though, that

bay was a give-out horse. I done gentled him too well to bolt for thunder. He hadn't gone and et loco weed, had he?"

Josie flung up a hand before her eyes. She saw again all too terribly that down-swooping watery avalanche. Bruce jerked his head toward the arroyo, where the flood water still flowed above the tops of the lower bushes.

"I'm taking Jo home," he said. "Let out your stirrups."

Corveau grinned across his saddle as he slid to the ground.

"You hear him, Miss Jo, bossing me 'round like as if I was a greaser. He's a kantankerous goon-eyed contagion. If you don't watch out, you'll catch him."

"No, Sid, I'm the contagion. He's caught me. I've been roped." The brown eyes misted at the remembrance. "Oh, Sid, I would have—have gone under with the bay, only Bruce—he threw and pulled me up."

"Lord, that ain't so much for him to brag on. Any other fair-to-middling buckaroo could 'a' done that. What I admire for to say is, I'm plumb proud of his speed in gentling his catch. I tried, and got kicked off the earth."

"You ought to be ashamed, Sid. I made it as easy for you as I could."

"Sure. You meant well. They all do—all the promise-to-be-sisters. But even a gentle little lamb like me would rather bump into a fist than be knocked out by a pillow.—Going, are you, boss? Well, *adios*. When do I bring the truck to cart home your remains?"

Bruce nodded soberly to Josie.

"Don't mind his foolishness. He can't help it. He's jealous because you're now my protector, instead of him."

" 'Taint that a-tall, Miss Jo. It's you I'm worrying about. That sorrel critter carries double. Reckon I best go along to hold you on."

Behind the smiling girl the friends exchanged glances. Bruce shook his head and swung into the saddle. He did not believe the Bar L would attack him even after he left Josie at the ranch and started back alone.

Corveau was better acquainted with the outfit. He took his rifle from the scabbard under Bruce's leg, with the excuse that he had seen a gray wolf across the valley.

"I'll try sneaking up on Lobo. He won't be looking for a cowboy what ain't forking a horse —just like Bill and the bunch, if I have to come and get my boss. Don't keep him long, Miss

Jo. I'm mighty apt to feel ornery when my boss strays and I have to round him up afoot."

The girl started off, smiling at the banter. Bruce smiled only with his lips. He had read the meaning behind the lightly spoken words. If anything should happen to him at the Bar L, Corveau meant to exact payment in kind, with heavy interest.

So far as Bruce had been able to learn, the young fellow never had killed except in self-defence or as a deputy sheriff. But an attack on the Bar L, even if justified, would put him definitely over the line into the ranks of the killers. He would have to live as a gunman, which meant every chance of an early death.

This last did not concern Bruce so much as the first. He voiced his thought to Josie as they rode out of the gap.

"Sid has the makings. Hasn't touched a drop since he said he'd go dry. This fence matter, though—it's a big strain on him. Don't know that I can hold him in if there's a next time. It would be a pity. He's too much all right to be driven to join one of the Border gangs."

"Yes, now that he has quit moonshine. That is one reason I came to-day. You and dad must get together on some kind of an agreement. I know you can and will."

The doubt felt by Bruce did not cloud the glow in his blue eyes. Enough that she was still beside him. What use to worry about trouble ahead until face to face with it?

As they jogged along the dusty road his glance turned to the creek. Its swollen stream was fast dwindling. But where the arroyo shallowed out below the gap, puddles still gleamed in the sun, yards away from the banks.

The cloudburst flood had again gathered force after its outspread above the cañon. It had come on with a big head. Enough had swept down-creek to fill all of March's water-holes to overflowing.

As the couple rounded the corner of the first ridge they saw a distant cloud of dust drifting up the road. Josie gave Bruce's hand a quick last clasp.

"I told you I was afraid dad would worry about me. It's way past noon."

A word from Bruce put their horses into a gallop. Midway to the trail arroyo March came spurring to meet them. His face was as dark red as the porphyry cliffs of the front ridge. His gray eyes had the cold glint of polished steel.

"Where you been?" he thundered at Josie. "What you doing with this fellow? Where's your horse?"

"He's—he's drowned, dad. Bruce just barely saved me."

The look in his daughter's eyes checked March. She was not a girl to make much of small happenings. The sudden realization that she had missed death by a hairbreadth brought him up short, like a plunging outlaw roped to a snubbing post.

"I'd have come for you sooner, only the dam went out," he muttered. "Been trying to save a little of the water."

"The dam? I remember you told Bill those old logs needed replacing."

"All rotten! Told him last year. I ought to've made it an order. It's only fair, though, to remember he's been hard-ridden with other work since the water in the hole sank low enough to get at the bottom logs. That cloudburst came down like a stampede. No telling what it's done to the lower holes."

"Hard lines," sympathized Bruce. "But Sid tells me the rains ought to set in within a few weeks."

March bristled.

"We'll part right here. Jo, you get on behind me. Sooner I settle with Stanhope the better. I always aim to pay my debts, young man. What do I owe you for saving her?"

"Well——" Bruce looked Josie up and down with a quizzical glance. "That's pretty hard to say, Mr. March. It all depends. For instance, at about what do you value her?"

"What d'you mean? Dammit, I don't want any of your lip. Name your pay, and I'll settle with you right here and now."

Bruce wheeled his horse to ride back.

"Wait," begged Josie. She bent appealingly toward her father. "I've asked him to dinner, dad. . . . He saved my life."

Cross-grained and hard as was the cattle-man, he was not inhuman. Against his stubbornness and enmity tugged the laws of hospitality, love for his daughter, and the knowledge that she owed her life to the nephew of Peter Haines. Gall would have tasted less bitter in his mouth, yet he growled the wished-for invitation:

"Come on—both of you. We'll square accounts at the ranch."

CHAPTER XIII

A TRUCE

MARCH led the way and set the pace at a lope. He was too impatient and irritated to consider his horse. Josie and Bruce rode close behind him, anxious yet hopeful.

The ranch appeared to be deserted. Bruce felt no surprise at this, for he had expected all men within reach to be at work on the broken dam. March jerked his thumb toward the house and loped past it, on along the road to the waterhole.

Sight of Bruce dismounting with her stepniece brought Mrs. Lomax ruffling up out of her rocker. Josie hastened to avert the teapot tempest.

"Oh, Aunt Hetty, what d'you think? That cloudburst washed my horse right out from under me. I had to climb up a rope—Mr. Stanhope's rope. We met dad on the road. Mr.

Stanhope is to stay and talk things over. We haven't had a bite to eat."

"I'll tell Al to dish up what's left," snapped Mrs. Lomax, with a look at Bruce about as unctuous as oil of vitriol.

He found his way to the men's wash basin, around in the rear porch. Al, the cook, sat humped on the bench, sucking his old pipe. He gave one cross-eyed glance at the invader and reached for his gun. He was the man who had cut the fence wire.

Bruce put up his hands in mock fright.

"Don't shoot, Mr. Cutter! It's t'other kind of sinkers I'm after."

The acid voice of Mrs. Lomax in the kitchen struck the scowling cook like a dash of vinegar on a raw cut. He jumped for the door.

Brushed, sudsed and curried, Bruce sauntered back to the front veranda. As he sipped a drink from the sweating *olla,* Josie floated out to him, looking as cool and fresh as the water tasted. She had changed from her dusty riding costume to low shoes and an afternoon dress of satiny pink fabric.

Mrs. Lomax thrust her hatchet face out of the doorway to fix the young couple with a suspicious stare and announce that their dinner had been "dished up."

After his months of batching in camp, the clean-scrubbed dining-room and white oilcloth of the long table stirred Bruce's remembrance of city manners. He drew out Josie's chair and seated her as gracefully as if his work clothes were evening dress.

"My land!" rasped Mrs. Lomax. "Don't tell me you've been a waiter in one of them high-toned hostelries."

"No such luck, ma'am. Nearest I ever came to raking in the tips was paying them."

"Uh?"

"Yes'm. I dude-wrangled a millionaire tenderfoot across the Navaho reservation. Took a *pasear* East with him. He wanted to put me through college.

"Was his daughter very beautiful?" asked Josie.

"How'd you guess it? She was a vision, an angel, and all of five years old. Yes, if you please, ma'am; two spoonfuls of sugar and some of that honest-to-goodness cream. Of course I schemed to hand 'round a dozen years or so and wed the heiress. Only, a dozen weeks of rain dampened my ardor. I hit back to God's country."

Mrs. Lomax muttered more audibly perhaps than she realized:

"Pity the cloudburst didn't dampen you, 'stead of Josephine's horse!"

Josie's quick glance at Bruce was unnecessary. He understood perfectly the reason for the bitterness of Bill's ma. He smiled and went at his food with an appetite as keen as the girl's.

Mrs. Lomax did not leave them alone for a moment. She followed out into the front veranda. Her son and March were riding up from the waterhole. She looked worriedly at Bruce.

"I hope you'll behave yourself."

"Yes'm. I hope so too. I'll try not to bite unless I'm bitten."

March and Lomax came in hot, tired and irritable. The cool drinks instantly offered by Josie failed to ease their ill humor. Her dress advertised the fact that she was favoring the visitor from Grass Valley.

"Fed, have you?" demanded March.

"Yes, dad, and now——"

He turned upon Bruce.

"First, what about your shooting up Bill and O'Keefe last night?"

Bruce opened a saddlebag and took out O'Keefe's revolvers and Lomax's hat and pistol. The holes in the crown of the hat caught March's eye.

"Put it on, Bill. . . . So—Just what I

thought. If you had been a highbrow it might have creased you."

"Would a man with brains have been caught out at night in such company as this?" asked Bruce.

He held up the two wire nippers.

"If that's all your evidence!" scoffed March. "Anybody can buy cutters."

"These happen to be branded with the Bar L."

"What of it?"

"Only this, Mr. March. I had a fence wire cut, and you had a man shot. No serious damage on either side. Suppose we call it quits? I forget the cutting, and you call off your hands till we get a court decision."

"Well, seeing that Jo says you pulled her out of the flood. . . . You hear, Bill? No more night riding."

"It was only to help you, Uncle Wynn. It's an illegal fence, anyhow. We've got a right to go into the valley. What's more, we need the grass bad. The steers won't prime up without it."

The reminder stirred March's quick anger.

"You hear that, Stanhope? What have you to say?"

"My offer of a driveway still stands—on the terms I gave."

"Your terms be——"

"Dad! Oh, please, dad!"—Josie's hands clasped entreatingly over his thick shoulder. "If it hadn't been for him, I'd be up there—in the swamp!"

"The less I have to do with you two nesters, the better I'll be suited. This is my country, and before I get through with you——"

"Wait, dad! You promised to pay him for saving me."

The thrust silenced March. Before he could burst out again, Josie started to give the details of her morning's ride and her escape from the flood. She first told of her meeting with Corveau and his version of the fight.

Lomax interrupted her, with fretful indignation.

"Sid's a liar. They began the shooting. Pat only fired in self-defense. He tried to shoot out the lights so we could make our get-away without hurting anybody."

"No one would have been hurt if you had dropped your guns and run with your fence cutters," said Bruce. "Your herd was ready to stampede through the cut fence. We fired only to stampede you. O'Keefe shot to kill. I

found two of his bullets in the tree, close under one lamp, and two under the other lamp."

"That's enough," said March. "Bill has his orders to leave you alone. But I won't answer for O'Keefe. Corveau had better watch out for him.—Now, daughter, go on."

Josie hastened to continue her account. She told of the race up the walled valley and the down-rush of the flood. She talked quietly, but her pauses and the look in her eyes spoke volumes. Even Mrs. Lomax sighed with relief and beamed at Bruce when his rope heaved the teller up clear of the torrent.

"I suppose, Wynn, we've got to admit he's put us under obligations, saving Josephine—if it really was that bad."

"Not at all," Bruce said quickly. "You owe me nothing. I was just lucky enough to see her in time, and I've been paid ten times over."

He turned to Josie. Not even Lomax could mistake the look that passed between the two or the delectable color that deepened in the girl's cheeks.

"So that's how the wind sets," rumbled March. "If I had known——"

"Don't, dad!" begged Josie. "It's months yet before I'll be eighteen. Until then I want to

do as you wish. All I ask is that Bruce can come to see me here at home."

"You ask that, when you know how I feel toward him?"

"But now you know how *I* feel, dad dear. I want to see him without having to do it behind your back. We are willing to wait until you give your consent, if only you'll——"

The volcano of wrath erupted:

"No. Not in a thousand years. I'll never consent."

"Now you're talking, Uncle Wynn," approved Lomax. "You've said a whole mouthful."

March glared at him. It was the psychological moment for Josie. Her cool arm slipped about the swelling red neck. Her soft cheek caressed his bristly jowl.

March drew the girl's face around and stared hard into her tear-brimming eyes.

"Dammit," he growled. "What I ought to do is give you a good lathering with a quirt. . . . You promise you won't go to meet him anywhere if he's allowed to come here?"

"Yes—I mean, no. I'd only——"

"You won't run off with him?"

"Of course not! Oh, you darling dad! Then he can come?"

"If he wants to push in where he's not wanted."

Bruce rose to go.

"*Mil gracias, padre.* I'll stop coming when Jo tells me to stay away."

He smiled at her, flourished his hat to Mrs. Lomax, and jingled light-heartedly down to the horses. Like Josie, he was willing to wait, and he was still boy enough to believe that he could in time overcome the hostility of her father.

CHAPTER XIV

THE KNOCKER KNOCKED

THE truce did not agree with Corveau. Constant expectation of trouble had given him the pleasurable excitement that he craved. Talk of peace took the savor out of life. He openly regretted his promise to quit drink.

But he was too optimistic regarding the character of Windy March for his depression to last long. Also he cheered himself with the thought that O'Keefe probably would soon be in condition for action.

In this mood he listened tolerantly to Bruce's plans for a ditch system heading in the mouth of the cañon. He knew nothing about irrigation, and took only a mild interest in the project when Bruce showed him how the ditches could easily be run around on the side slope of the valley.

The objection at last occurred to him that a

ditch is of no use without water. He pointed out how the creek nearly always ran dry at the very season when a flow was most needed, if crops were to be raised other than at the time of the fall rains.

Bruce came back at him with inquiries about the alkali sink out on the plains beyond the last waterhole, the length of the rainy season, and the usual depth of the creek during that period and after. He then measured the average width of the creek bed. Though not an engineer, he had worked half a year on an irrigation survey and had picked up quite a deal of information about hydraulics.

"A three-foot dam is all we'll need," he gave his conclusions. "That will fill our canal and let enough flow spill over to keep March's holes full. The waste that's now lost every year in the sink is enough to cover our land. No need of an all-year irrigation. A heavily soaked subsoil will send up moisture for months."

"You're the doctor," sighed Corveau. "Only thing, if we had more land, we could get the joke on Windy—use all the water. We'd have action then. Can't you hear him roar?"

The suggestion struck Bruce as only another of his buddy's hare-brained absurdities.

"Go douse your head in the spring barrel," he

advised. "We can't have any more disrespectful talk about my future dad-to-be."

"Future may-be," chortled Corveau. "Don't count your chicken before she's hitched."

The warning won only a smile of pity from Bruce. In six months Josie would reach her eighteenth birthday. After that her father's word no longer would be law. But, for her sake, he wished to gain the consent of the cattleman to their marriage.

By severe self restraint, he kept himself from riding down to the ranch more than three evenings a week. He showed no resentment against the constant presence of March and the two Lomaxes during his calls. On the contrary, their attempts to make him uncomfortable served only to bring out his self control and good-humor.

March soon gave over his blustering attacks. The young couple were so discreetly undemonstrative that he could not long keep up any great heat. For the most part they listened to the talk of March and Lomax about the ranch.

The caller soon learned that the brush-and-earth dams of the second and third water-holes had been so broken by the flood that their capacity was reduced more than half.

"We've got enough water in 'em, though, to

last till the rains," Lomax hastened to inform the visitor. "I'm fixing all three dams so they won't bust again."

The polite inquiries of Bruce won still more polite explanations. He ventured suggestions, which were most politely ignored.

In turn, Mrs. Lomax asked scoffingly how his crops were coming on. Like her son and stepbrother, she made no attempt to conceal the fact that she was looking forward with pleasurable expectancy to the complete failure of his venture. Loss of his crop would mean loss of almost all the money he had spent upon implements and improvements. Should he fail, there would be less difficulty in disillusioning Josie.

Not to disappoint them too soon, Bruce said nothing of the little dam that he and Corveau were building at the mouth of cañon. He had already brought from the town a truckload of cement and blasting powder. The rock removed from the intake of the main ditch by means of the gasoline drill and well-placed charges of powder was being cemented into a wall across the dry stream bed.

News of this work would have proved of immense interest to March and his foreman. But the discreet silence maintained by Bruce postponed the dangerous disclosure. He had no wish

to start a fresh quarrel. Delay was all in his favor. Every day that passed meant a day nearer to Josie's independence.

Unfortunately the first hint that O'Keefe was up and around stirred Corveau's curiosity.

"Got his boots on again, has he? Still rather pale under the gills, but able to use his left hand. Poor old Pat! I'll have to call and cheer him up."

"Better keep away for a while, Sid. He might do something foolish if you came near him while his shoulder is still sore."

"Never you think it, buddy. That shoulder'll get sorer the older he grows—if he keeps on living. Nobody never said I dodged nobody. He's entitled to his try. To give him an even break, I'll keep one hand in my pocket when we meet up. What say?"

"Fair enough," agreed Bruce.

But he found occasion to run into Ariquito for a truckload of supplies. On the way back he stopped at the ranch. That afternoon, for the first time, Corveau saddled up and rode with him to share in the call. Near the Bar L barn he whooped a warning and dashed ahead at top speed.

To his bitter disappointment, the reckless challenge fell flat. No shot blazed out at him from

the barn or shed or bunkhouse. Worse still, no one about the ranch paid the slightest heed to his clattering rush. Mrs. Lomax came out on the back porch and went in again without seeming to see him.

Crestfallen but still on his guard, he rode around to the front of the house. The usual family group was gathered in the veranda. Josie waved a welcoming hand.

"Oh, Sid—you stranger! Glad to see you. Come in. Where's Bruce?"

"Howdy, folks. He's coming. I rode ahead to see how Pat was feeling. Nary a pop from him. Don't tell me he's got bedded down again!"

"Who?—O'Keefe?" growled March. "No, he's gone down-creek. Jo said he's fit to ride. Time he was earning his wages."

"Too bad I didn't call sooner. I guess he thinks he wants to see me. Sorry to disappoint him."

"You son-of-a-gun. We're short enough of riders already, what with this work on the dam."

Josie thought she saw an opening.

"Why not let Pat go, dad, and take on Sid and Bruce? Their crops will need no attention till after the rains."

"*Oops,* Miss Jo—no can do. Couldn't think

of crowding Pat off the range before he's had his chance to meet me. Moreover, we're not hiring out yet awhile. Got to finish our dam and ditches."

Bruce came upon the scene just in time to hear this innocent betrayal. He saw March swelling for a blast of rage.

"Don't go off at half-cock, *padre,*" he called. "The way Sid put it, you might think he's trying to start something."

"Who, me?" protested the culprit, "what've I gone and done now?"

"Done your boss—spilled the beans!" jeered Lomax. "We hadn't even smelled a guess of what you've been up to."

Bruce sprang off to follow Corveau into the veranda. He was halted on the steps by a bellow from March.

"Clear out, you lying double-crosser!"

Corveau smiled. Here was promise of quick and interesting action. Lomax edged toward his mother. From beside her father's chair Josie gazed at Bruce in trustful appeal. His face had gone white under its tan. His blue eyes had lost their mild good-humor. They were as flinty as March's. But he saw Josie's look. Though his lips did not relax, he spoke quietly.

"Mr. March, you'll take that back, or you'll prove it true. I haven't lied to you——"

"Same thing, dammit! You've come boot-licking 'round here while you stole my water. If that's not lying and double-crossing I'm a greaser. Thought you'd knife me in the back, *heh?*"

Tried beyond endurance, Bruce thrust back with a cool contempt more maddening than any violent curse:

"You are a coward. You know I can't shoot the father of my girl. For another thing, you're bawling before you're roped. No harm has been done you, and none is intended."

"Don't lie! Corveau has let it out. You've built a dam."

"I'm building one."

March leaped to his feet, purple-faced, spluttering. Corveau had shifted to one side. He sang out cheerfully:

"It's all right, Miss Jo. No need to holler. I'll just shoot it out of his hand."

The assurance failed to assure. Josie flung herself upon her father and clung to him, trembling with fright. He shoved her roughly away.

"Keep clear," he bellowed. "I'm going to

knock the daylights out of both these young skunks."

He charged like a furious bull. Bruce jumped to meet him. The cattleman swung out his maul fists in tremendous clumsy blows. One grazed past Bruce's ear, the other swept over his ducked head. A jarring upper-cut stopped March short in his rush and snapped his big head backward. Bruce's right fist followed with a jolt to the solar plexus, short but heavy and backed by all his weight.

March crumpled. He would have fallen hard had not Bruce eased him down.

CHAPTER XV

HER CHOICE

INSTEAD of rolling over to bound up again, March flattened out on his back. Josie took one look at his white face and glassy eyes, and ran for water. Mrs. Lomax began to screech.

The ear-piercing shrieks disturbed Corveau's enjoyment. He waggled a finger toward the shrinking Lomax. The screaming woman gasped silent to see what this new terror might portend.

"That's right, ma," approved Corveau. "This ain't a bluejay sing. Don't worry. He ain't dead yet. It's only a temporary shortage of air."

Josie knelt to moisten her father's face with a dampened handkerchief. Though unable to move, his eyes showed clear consciousness. Bruce looked down at him without any exultation, but equally without any trace of regret.

"I take it, you're quiet enough now to listen to facts," he said. "Come up to the valley and

you'll see that my dam is not intended to divert all the water when there's a flow. My plan is to take out only what wastes into the sink every year. If your holes are kept filled, where is your loss?"

March could not yet control his voice to speak. But Josie lifted her face to beam at the man who shared her love with him.

"Oh, Bruce, so that is it? Of course dad will not be angry now."

"It wasn't pleasant for me doing this. You know it wasn't, Jo. But I had to make him listen, and it was the only way. I'm waiting for him to take back what he said."

Suggestion of the probability of an apology from Windy March brought an amused grin to Corveau's thin lips. The grin broadened at sight of the glint in the sick eyes of the knocked-out man. Their gaze fixed upon the glass in Josie's hand. She raised his head and held the glass to his lips.

After drinking he drew in a deep breath and, with her help, heaved up to a sitting position.

"L-Lord!" he gasped. "Young cuss—kicks like—a bay steer."

Between them, Bruce and Josie helped him up into his chair. Strangely enough, he accepted their aid without a growl. Josie picked

up his pipe and placed it in his half-clenched hand. He felt rather shakily for his tobacco pouch.

"Well?" asked Bruce. "How about it? Do you still want to knock my head off?"

March paused to fill and light his pipe. With the first puff his face took on again its usual granite hardness. Yet there was a change in his look as he peered up through the smoke at the sternly waiting man whom he had insulted.

He was far from subdued. Fear had no part in his rugged nature. The change was owing to an entirely different cause. A grim, half-reluctant smile of approval bent his hard lips. He rubbed his bruised jaw.

"You sure belted me a brace of 'em. Man who can hit like that is entitled to a hearing. Now, how about that dam?"

"I've told you. The idea is to divert the flow only when your holes are full. No use wasting the water that is lost in the sink. Sid and I plan to run it into our subsoil. That will mean sure crops."

"Well, maybe you know if it will work. I'm no farmer. Nine months of the year there's no more than enough water in the creek to keep

the holes even part full. Still, if you figure to use only the flood overflow——"

The puffs of the pipe were becoming slower. Josie drew in a breath of relief and gave Bruce a smile that brought the warmth back into his blue eyes. He bent a little toward her father.

"I think we're beginning to understand each other, Mr. March. I don't like to fight if I can help it—especially with you. We have Jo to consider. Why not give me a chance to make good with you?"

March again rubbed his chin.

"Well, I don't know but what you've made something of a start already. You put a whole lot of argument into those two punches."

"Then why not shake on it? You'd find me easy to get along with. Of course it's a good deal to ask your consent over Jo——"

"Yes, it is." March drew the girl down upon the arm of his chair. "Whoever gets this piece of me has got to prove himself an A-one all-around topman."

"No man is good enough for her, Mr. March. But I happened to be lucky enough—"

"It's for you to make good, then. I won't have any farmer nester for a son-in-law. I'll buy out you and Corveau and take you on in place of O'Keefe."

Some strong urge impelled Lomax to break the restraint of discretion.

"But, Uncle Wynn, I can't let Pat go. I—I promised him he could stay on as long as he wants."

"You did? Why?"

"Because—well—you know how he stood by us over the—over the Haines matter."

The face of March went bleak. He shot an uneasy glance at Bruce.

"That!" he muttered. "Why d'you have to drag that in?"

"You know why well enough," Mrs. Lomax took up the attack. "Idea of you sitting there and as good as promising Josephine to the kin of a sneaky rustler!"

"Take care, Het. You're a woman, but——"

"I'm not fool enough to think our folks can hitch up with his sort."

"What's the matter with him? He hadn't had anything to do with his uncle for ten years. You heard him say it."

There now could be no mistaking which way the wind was beginning to blow. Stung to desperation, the woman turned upon Bruce.

"Anybody can guess what you're like! A make-believe puncher who'll hang around, boot-

licking, to get the daughter of the man who shot down your uncle when his hands were up!"

Corveau clicked his tongue.

For all his hardihood, March did not meet Bruce's gaze. His blustering protest rang a bit hollow——

"It's a lie. She doesn't know—wasn't there. I didn't shoot Haines."

Mrs. Lomax smiled venomously at Bruce.

"He's right. I apologize. He didn't pull the trigger. He was only head of the party. One of his cowboys did the shooting. He only kept still about it."

"Oh, Aunt Hetty!" cried Josie. "How can you?"

"Your father called me a liar. It's time the truth is spoken."

"Why not the whole truth?" jeered Corveau, his mouth like a thin gash, his dark irises widely under-banded with white.

At the question Lomax edged sideways and slipped back around the corner of the house. Corveau's hand had started to drop to his belt. But he did not draw. His alert glance darted back to Bruce and March. The eyes of both were now as flinty as before the fight.

"So Uncle Pete was shot when his hands

were up," said Bruce. "That was murder. Who did the killing?"

"I don't know," rejoined March. "The shot came from behind me."

"You didn't try to find out?"

"No, and if I had, I wouldn't tell. I held a warrant against Haines. We found a lot more cows brand-blotted. One of the boys maybe thought Haines started to drop his hand to draw. In any case, he was a caught rustler. He got what was coming to him."

"Oh, dad!—don't!" begged Josie.

Bruce fixed his darkening eyes upon her.

"You have heard," he said. "This ends it between him and me. How about you? Are you coming with me?"

"But—but, Bruce—Oh dear! You surely, can't mean——"

"I do."

March put his thick arm about the quivering girl.

"That settled him for good, daughter. You're under age; and, anyhow, you wouldn't leave me for the nephew of a rustler."

Positively as he spoke, his voice lacked the harshness of command. It carried a suggestion of appeal. Josie's hand clasped his shoulder

even while her troubled eyes looked up at Bruce. His own clouded with reproach.

"You must choose," he insisted. "I am what he says—the nephew of a rustler. But what is he? You can't become my wife and remain his daughter. You must come with me now."

"She can't marry without my consent. You know it," rumbled March.

Josie started to draw away from him toward Bruce, hesitated, and leaned back against his shoulder. All the life had died out of her grief-stricken eyes.

"Why must you make it so hard, Bruce? Dad didn't do the shooting, and he doesn't know who did."

"He became responsible, not reporting it. Do you stay with him, or will you come with me?"

She turned and flung her arms about the neck of her father.

Bruce waited. But the sobbing girl continued to cling to her father. Her face was pressed hard against his big chest. She was only a young girl, and these two men whom she loved were tearing her heart between them.

March locked her in his great arms and smiled grimly at Bruce over her sob-shaken head. He had won. Her choice was to stay with him. He

held her fast. She would never leave him for this hated nephew of Haines.

The same belief forced itself upon Bruce. He knew little about girls. Because Josie did not seek to free herself and come to him—did not even look around—he felt certain that her love for him had been only a passing fancy. Yet his only thought was for the grieving girl.

"Don't cry, Jo," he said. "It's all right. These mistakes are bound to happen, and no one to blame. It's better for you to find out now that you do not love me than it would be later on. What I want most of all is for you to be happy."

Josie had ceased to sob. She turned her head to gaze at him through her tears, in wide-eyed bewilderment.

"O-oh, Bruce! Surely—surely you can't think that I don't love you!"

"Does this look like it?" he reproached.

"But I can't leave dad—you know I can't leave him!"

"Yes, I know it now, and that proves the truth. You only think you love me. I'll go away and not bother you any more. You'll soon forget all this. God bless your dear little heart. Come, Sid."

He swung about and down the steps, and sprang into his saddle. He did not look back even for a parting glance as the touch of his spur sent Chico plunging off around the house.

CHAPTER XVI

NO THOROUGHFARE

HARD as Corveau rode, his horse proved no match for Chico. They were a quarter-mile behind when the panting sorrel came to a halt in the trail arroyo. Bruce sat tense in his saddle, moody-eyed and impatient, gazing westward up the mountain cleft into the angry red glare of sunset. There ran the quickest road away from the Bar L.

"What's your hurry, buddy?" said Corveau banteringly as he walked his horse down into the arroyo. "Talk about Windy flying off the handle——"

"That'll do," cut in Bruce. "Here's where our trails fork. I'm heading out. If you want the Haines section and what's on it, I'll arrange the transfer before I leave Ariquito."

Corveau stared, open-mouthed.

"What the——Heading out? Didn't take you for a quitter!"

"Do you want what I'm leaving, or don't you?" Bruce demanded.

"No!" exploded Corveau. "What the devil do I care for dirt and farm tools? If you quit, I quit. I'm going to stay hitched to my sidekick."

Bruce caught himself softening. The fellow had kept his word over not drinking and had stood by him like a true pard. Yet there was that other deal.

"How about the shooting of my uncle?" he questioned. "You did not give me the facts."

"Didn't I?" Corveau looked genuinely aggrieved. "Who jabbed you about a necktie party, first time we met? That ought to've put you wise."

"Let's hear the facts now."

"I figger you won't ask that, buddy, when you stop to think. It would be telling, wouldn't it? They were my bunch then."

The argument might be somewhat askew. None the less, such as it was, it raised a point of honor. Bruce's opinion of his companion came up a notch. Loyalty is loyalty, even though mistaken. What made it still more creditable, Corveau undoubtedly hated O'Keefe, despised Lomax, and had cause to feel vengeful against March.

The refusal of another man to talk might have indicated that he had been the one who did the shooting. Not so Corveau. By this time Bruce knew him well enough to feel sure that, brought thus to the point, he would neither lie nor keep silent to shield himself.

"You've said it, Sid. That's settled. Now, about the other matter. The offer stands. You'd lose nothing and might make big money. The crop is in. If it comes through——"

"Nothing doing," broke in Corveau.

Bruce frowned at this utter lack of reasonableness.

"Well, we can haul in the machinery and get some cash for the outfit, secondhand. Pity, though, you're too big a fool not to grab at such a chance. You can't get two bits for your relinquishment."

"How about your section? Who'll buy it? You can't find nobody with nerve enough to buck Windy. Here's even you quitting."

The thrust brought a flush into Bruce's lean face.

"You know it's not that, Sid."

"Just the same, it's what they'll all say."

"Let them. I don't belong in this country. What do I care?"

"You care for Miss Jo. How'll she feel, hearing the anvil chorus knock you?"

The jeer only made Bruce set his jaw the harder.

"It will prove to her how mistaken she was in her feeling toward me."

"Talk about fools!" jibed Corveau. "You *vamosing,* when all you got to do is stick on a while to win!"

"If I could believe it! But she made her choice. You saw her."

"I saw her when you lit out. Man alive, if you'd a'seen her eyes! You plumb busted her poor little heart."

"She chose to stay with him."

Corveau rolled a cigarette, took a puff, and flung it away.

"Aw, shucks! How long has she knowed you? He's her daddy. He's the biggest man in the whole world to her. And you figger she don't care, just because she can't jump and leave him first crack. I'm saying I saw her eyes—and I'm saying you're a fourflusher if you quit when she needs you most."

Bruce's hand shot out and gripped the shoulder of the taunter.

"Sid, don't lie about it!"

"It's God's truth. Ma Lomax is dead set on her marrying Bill. He gets her if you quit."

The pull on Chico's bridle rein started him on along the road to Grass Valley. As Corveau spurred his horse to follow, he began to wail the Cowboy's Lament. He was once more carefree and happy.

At dusk they came up the home arroyo to the tent, Corveau still singing, Bruce more than usually silent. Supper was over before he spoke his thought.

"It's war, Sid, from now on."

"Sure pop. War to the knife, and the knife to the hilt."

"There's just one way to settle it. I'm going to make him give Jo to me."

"Can't be did, old timer—can't be did. Better try to rope the cow that jumped over the moon."

Bruce hunted out writing paper, an envelope, and the stub of an indelible pencil.

"All right, *amigo*. It's for him to say. He gives her to me, or I break him. I don't like to do it even now. He's her father. But there's Uncle Pete. I can't make March pay for that by law. You'll not testify. It's just as well, though. There's another and better way to get him. He deserves to be broken, even if he

lets Jo come to me. We'll see about that after we get him hog-tied."

"So? And as how? Spill it."

"They told me to-day. You know that chimney stack up in the pinch, near the head of the cañon. Well, that's the answer. You'll savvy when I come back from mailing this letter."

Corveau knew when not to be inquisitive. Enough for him that real war was on at last against the Bar L. He could now look forward to lively action. To break Windy March would take something more than a parlor dusting.

Next morning Bruce jogged over the mountains to Ariquito. He brought back with him a number of rock drills, which he had ordered on his last trip. At the branching of the trails he was joined by Corveau, who had been on watch against the Bar L from the crest of the front ridge.

"Cattle all drifted down to the lower range. No sign of trouble toward," he reported. "Guess Windy's satisfied to let you chew on the bitter cud for a while. 'Long as he's got Miss Jo, he figgers you'll not be too altogether happy. Thinks he'll let that get under your skin. But you can bet your bottom dollar Miss Jo ain't

laughing so hard as she might. They'll be kept busy trying to talk her into letting Bill get his rope on her."

"All we need is ten days or two weeks," said Bruce. "I've seen our lawyer. The legal end is shaped up."

Down in the valley the two rode at once to the mouth of the narrow little cañon. Before nightfall Bruce had the work planned. At gray dawn the gasoline drill began to hammer. For ten days it was kept going almost fourteen hours a day. Some of the drills broke; all the others became dull. But Bruce did not stop the work until it had been finished to his satisfaction.

"There we are," he said, as they pulled the least blunted of the drills from the last hole. "Now for the fireworks. I'll run in to-night with the truck and one of the trailers."

"Second the motion, buddy. I know best where to cross the creek coming back so's to shy 'round the ranch beyond rifle-shot."

"You can tell me now, Sid. No use of two going."

Corveau grinned.

"Whithersoever thou goest up in a chariot of fire, there go I also."

"You locoed mule! . . . We might pack the stuff across by trail."

"That would be a dead give-away. Why, you innocent babe on a bottle, somebody would be bound to savvy, moment we started to get a pack train together. Pierson or Ollie Bray or 'most any other hanger-on of Windy's would hop a car and run out to put the Bar L wise."

"What of it?"

"Oh, nothing, boss, nothing—only—no better place in the world to lay an ambuscade than up on top there, among the rocks and cedars. No, we've got to bluff it—keep 'em unsuspectious—and flank 'em with a sudden-like circle 'round the ranch."

To this Bruce agreed, though he argued that one was the right number for the party. Corveau's determination could not be shaken.

In keeping with his suggestion, Bruce gave up the idea of rushing past the Bar L during the night. The start was made just early enough in the morning to reach the ranch when Corveau knew that everyone would be at breakfast.

At the trail arroyo Corveau shifted with his rifle to the trailer. He had a tarpaulin ready to cover himself, and he had made peep-holes in the side boards of the trailer.

Bruce kept his weapons out of sight. He drove at a moderate speed. If the women were at home, he felt certain there would be no risk in passing the ranch. The danger would come later, on the return trip, if the Bar L were given reason to suspect the nature of the load he would be bringing back from town.

None the less, on nearing the buildings he eyed them as alertly as Corveau stared through his peepholes. There was a chance that O'Keefe had returned from the lower range. He, if not others, might open fire on the nester, even if March had given orders to the contrary.

The time had, however, been well chosen by Corveau. All hands were away from the bunkhouse and barn—as Bruce soon perceived. Truck and trailer had no more than passed the barn when men began to come out into the back porch of the house. Bruce recognized O'Keefe among the three first. He called a low warning to Corveau.

But then March shoved his way out past the others, followed by Lomax. He shook his fist at Bruce and bellowed at his loudest:

"Hey, you! Back up. Get off my land."

Opposite him Bruce came to an easy stop. He replied with cool contempt:

"I'll be glad to get off your land and keep

off, Mr. March. Put up corners on what you own. Coming back I'll go 'round on the land you don't own. Just now my shortest way off is straight ahead."

He threw in the gear. The truck began to move forward. O'Keefe burst out from amongst the group and jumped before March. He shouted a vile name at Bruce. It was a name which, if not resented, would brand a man a coward.

Bruce stopped the truck and bent to jump out. At the same moment March swung his big fist. It struck O'Keefe behind the ear. The gunman went down in the dust like a steer shot through the head. March flung out his fist at Bruce.

"Go on! Get out of here!"

Without delay, but no less without hurry, Bruce restarted his killed engine and threw in the gear. Truck and trailer slowly rolled ahead. O'Keefe still lay at March's feet, as motionless as he would have lain if he had been given time to draw. Only, in the latter event, he never again would have stirred. Corveau's finger had been ready on the trigger of his rifle.

Near the front of the house Bruce caught sight of an anxious face drawing back from an

open side window. His hand flung out in an involuntary gesture of appeal.

"Jo!" he called.

A wave of color flooded the girl's cheeks. But before he could stop the truck she turned her back upon him. The movement might have been due either to repulsion or to renunciation.

At the spring wash, above the first waterhole, Corveau took advantage of the slow crossing to jump from the trailer and rejoin Bruce on the truck.

"Made it by a fist," he chuckled. "Can't say I'm sorry. When I settle with Pat I want him to see it coming. As for Windy, it looks like he ain't aching for another inquest 'round the Bar L."

"They all heard what O'Keefe called me," said Bruce, his voice dull and indifferent. "That means he gets me next time we meet. Well, what's the difference? You saw Jo."

"Yes, I saw her. Just the same, I don't believe my eyes. She ain't that sort. . . . Anyhow, you're not going to lay down to the Bar L. As for Pat, don't forget I've got a first mortgage. Barring accidents coming home this trip, you'll live to see Windy hat in hand to you."

CHAPTER XVII

T N T

THE shipment ordered in Bruce's letter had come a day sooner than he had expected. On starting gingerly to unload the boxes, the train crew had been interrupted by the sheriff and forced to take the entire shipment a mile out beyond the town limits.

"Ariquito ain't a mining camp," he reminded Bruce and Corveau when the station agent sent them to him to see about moving the powder. "You got nigh on four ton of T N T. That's enough to blow the whole county off the map. What might you be aiming to do with so much risibility?"

"Rattlers, Pierse, rattlers," explained Corveau. "Y'see, we figger on feeding each of 'em a tablespoonful for breakfast. Sun comes up good and hot—*Bang!* By-by, Mr. Rattlesnake! What you might call a sort of solar expansion method."

Bray, the county recorder, displayed incredulity.

"Don't you believe it, Pierse. They are trying to conceal their real purpose."

Corveau looked abashed. He coughed and hesitated and apologetically murmured an admission.

"Well—I guess we've got to own up, gents. Mr. Stanhope—he's worked out the scheme. We're to sugarcoat the stuff and pour it down all the gopher holes. When the little cuties start nibbling the confectionery—why, you can figger for yourselves the money saved on plowing. Gasoline costs a lot these days."

The sheriff fixed his beady little eyes upon Bruce.

"Cough it up. That stuff stays till I know."

"Is it against the law to build an irrigation system?"

"No."

"That is what we are doing. Mr. March knows. Ask him."

Pierson grunted. "*Uh.* That's as may be. . . . .Load up, if you like, but don't bring it any closer to town—and don't leave till I tell you."

"Yessir, nosir, thanky, sir," murmured Corveau.

Before starting down the railroad Bruce stopped for a quarter load of cement, together with gasoline and other supplies. If they should get back to Grass Valley, they would have need to be well stocked with necessities.

As they started south alongside the railroad track Corveau looked back and saw a touring car enter the town on the north road. It stopped before the postoffice to let out a dainty, skirted figure.

"What did I tell you, buddy? There's Miss Jo come to town."

Bruce glanced around in time to see the lanky Lomax swing from the car after Josie.

"We're in for it. Our T N T is town talk. But the cement may help."

He drove fast over the roadless prairie, careless of the clumps of cactus through which the solid tires crunched without injury. The boxes of high explosive lay exposed to the full heat of the blazing sun. Corveau laughed as he jumped out on the pile.

"When she busts loose, count three. If you finish the count you'll know you're not kilt dead. It's a good rule. My ma taught me to use it on lightning."

He began to heave the T N T up to Bruce. The trailer was first loaded to capacity with a

core of the boxes, walled all around the outside with bags of cement. The rest of the explosive found place with the gasolene cans in the middle of the truck. They were likewise walled in with cases of canned goods, sacks of flour, and the rest of the cement.

"Mebbe the padding will stop rifle bullets, and mebbe it won't," observed Corveau. "Here's hoping. Kind of eases the strain to think it. Now for the shrouds."

He spread the tarpaulins over the loads with the solemnity of an undertaker.

"Rest in peace, Mr. T. Entee—else we'll rest in pieces."

Bruce started on low and drove circumspectly, avoiding holes and bumps as much as possible. He had doubts about the effects of jolts on heated T N T. Regardless of the sheriff's orders, he took the straightest route back to town.

While they were still half a mile out, Pierson came galloping to meet them. He shouted an angry command to halt. Bruce brought the truck to a halt and waited, as serious as Corveau was amused. The sheriff rode up alongside, hot and peppery.

"What d'you mean?" he demanded. "I told you not to bring that stuff any nearer town."

"I remember that," said Bruce. "Also I remember something about your trying to help your friend March cut my fence—without due process of law. Where's your authority now for blocking us off the public roads?"

"Public safety. You go 'round, if you go a'tall."

"Please tell us how, Mr. Sheriff," implored Corveau. "Don't forget they ain't no bridges 'cross the arroyos up there. As for getting over the tracks to go 'round to the left, 'taint just like walking on eggs. Course, though, seeing as how it's your orders, you'll stay'long-side and rise with us when she busts."

Pierson did not lack nerve, but he had been born and reared in a cattle country. Explosives in quantity were out of his line.

"Get around any way you can," he snapped. "Only thing, don't come any nearer town. You're too near a'ready."

"Hold on," said Bruce. "Just a word before you go. I happen to know there's T N T stored in Ariquito. That's against the law. But there's no law against hauling explosives through the streets. You ordered our shipment dumped down here, knowing who it was for and knowing we would have to take it out by the north road."

"You've got my orders," rejoined Pierson.

He clucked to his horse. Bruce put his hand on the starter of the engine and spoke quietly to the departing officer:

"We call your bluff, Pierson. Go right along. We'll follow. Better tell the folks not to get careless with their guns. They wouldn't want to blow up the whole town."

The sheriff wheeled back, now both angry and uneasy.

"You pair of crazy jacks! A sight of savvy you've got! I've done my level best to head you off. I'm through. Go ahead—go as far as you like. It ain't my funeral."

"Fan yourself, Pierse, fan yourself," soothed Corveau. "We saw Bill when he rolled into town. Pulled out *muy pronto,* did he?"

Though Pierson had a good poker face, his uneasiness became still more apparent.

"March has gone to look at his lower holes. You boys best leave your load here and lay over in town till he gets back to the ranch."

"Mighty good scheme, that—for the Bar L," chuckled Corveau. "Great idee—us laying 'round town while they cut our fences and run a thousand or so head of cattle up into the valley."

The sheriff blinked. "Didn't think of that, Sid. Well, it's a short ride across by trail."

"Mr. Pierson, you have my apology," said Bruce. "I was going to propose that you come along with us to the Bar L. But that, as you say, is none of your funeral."

"Besides, we don't need you," put in Corveau, very cheerfully. "If you hear a loud report of something that's happened, string up Pat, and ask questions afterward. But mebbe the cement will stop bullets at long range, and mebbe I'll get in the first shot."

Pierson shook his head but gave up the argument.

"Bill told me O'Keefe was so badly knocked out he couldn't go with Mr. March. Seemed to get worse. That's why Miss Jo run into town for Doc Perkins."

"Seemed?"

"Well, I'd hate to have Wynn March hit me under the ear. But O'Keefe is a husky customer. It's up to you to guess if he was shamming."

Bruce's reply was to start his engine. Truck and trailer rolled along, parallel with the tracks, behind the slowly jogging horse. As they neared the lower end of the town, people began

to hurry out upon the prairie on the opposite side.

Since its arrival, the big shipment of high explosive had caused much wagging of tongues. It now caused a no less animated movement of feet. Nor were the withdrawals all youthful or feminine. Oliver Bray and other thoughtful citizens showed lively concern over leading the women and children beyond the zone of danger.

Once on the smooth dust-cushioned main street of the town Bruce put on a little more speed. He stopped only at the blacksmith's shop for such of his drills as the smith had found time to sharpen on rush order. Pierson went no farther. He dismounted in the shade and stood uneasily watching the foolhardy pair until they had driven clear of the relieved town.

Out on the earth road Corveau spoke hopefully:

"Ever rub your hand on a cat's back and get a spark? The hottest boxes are down in the bottom of the trailer. This jogging may rub 'em together enough to. . . . Fun, ain't it—that feeling like ants crawling up and down your backbone?"

Bruce wiped the sweatband of his hat with one hand. The other he kept on the wheel. After the first mile he drove at increased speed,

but slowed for every slight roughness. He chanced no heavy jolt. His gaze never shifted from the road ahead.

The speedometer steadily reeled off the miles. The road gradually bent to the eastward. The car began to round the north end of the mountains. Corveau interrupted one of his songs to eye an outjutting ridge point. The hump of the extended under-ridge had to be crossed on low, for the road was full of loose stones.

However, no bullet came pinging from the rocks. Truck and trailer rolled on along the now southward curving road.

"Handy place, only too far from water," remarked Corveau. He added cheerfully, "But any rock or arroyo near the ranch will do 'em as well."

Again Bruce wiped the sweatband of his hat.

"Glad you can take it that way, Sid. I'm scared stiff."

"Leastways you're keeping a stiff upper lip," chuckled Corveau. "Me—I ain't been more happy-scairt in all my born days. I can just feel myself dissoluting into spirituous—*Whoa.* Jehu! *Whoa!* Look what's coming."

Bruce grasped his rifle and jumped.

"Come on," he called. "We'll have time to get clear."

When down on their feet, the hill that had covered the approach of the car again hid it from their view. They ran something over a hundred yards before the black top rose into sight. The car was coming at dizzy speed.

Neither had time to hunt cover. They swerved out on opposite sides of the road, rifles half raised. The car seemed literally to leap up over the round of the hill. It swooped down at them, roaring.

Corveau's eye was the quicker.

"Jo!" he yelled.

"Alone!" came back Bruce's shout.

CHAPTER XVIII

PERSONALLY CONDUCTED

THE girl's face swept suddenly nearer, tense and white—head hatless, brown hair flying in the fifty-mile wind of the car. But the engine had blanked into silence. Even on the down-grade the skilfully applied brakes so slowed the car's speed that the truck and trailer were passed without disaster.

A short distance farther on the car stopped. Bruce ran back down the road even faster than he had dashed up. But as he sprinted by the trailer, the car started off again. He stopped and stared after it, overcome with a disappointment as bitter as his joy had been sweet. The first glimpse of her face had filled him with the blissful thought that she had come out to meet him—perhaps to bring a warning. Yet now she was driving on toward town.

He turned about and climbed heavily into the truck seat. His fingers seemed strangely

clumsy over starting the engine. He had to stop and think how to throw in the gear.

Corveau waited until the slow-moving truck came up alongside him. He swung aboard, openly mirthful over Bruce's glumness.

"Some girl, that Jo," he remarked. "Must've been hitting it up a mile a minute. What d'you s'pose was her hurry?"

"Sabe Dios," muttered Bruce.

The teaser affected a start of alarm.

"Look out! Look behind!"

A backward glance showed Bruce that the car had turned around and was coming up close to the trailer. Once more the blood began to leap through his veins. He waved a greeting. Josie reversed gear and began to back down the hill.

This time her purpose could not be mistaken. She had come out to meet the truck but not to greet its driver. Bruce faced squarely ahead and drove as before, his eyes fixed upon the road. He would not have known that the car was following, but for Corveau's comments——

"What did I tell you? She's sure all there—Jo is. Bet you dollars to doughnuts she promised her dad not to talk to you. Just the same, that don't bar her from riding herd on us. Talk about grit!"

Bruce's face went white under its tan.

"Sid, if it's O'Keefe, he may not stop to see who she is. We're skunks if we let her keep on."

"How are we going to stop her?"

"Shoot the front tires."

"Heap of good that'd do! She could run circles 'round us with all four tires flat. As for Pat, happens I savvy that him and Bill are hitched for keeps, and Bill wants her bad as he wants the Bar L. Pat'll do anything to get his divvy. He ain't going to go *loco*."

The assurance only partly eased Bruce's dread for the safety of the girl. Yet the thought of turning back did not even occur to him. He had started out to take his load to the valley. Nothing could bend him from that purpose. The harder the blows of the Bar L, the harder would be his blows in return. He would not—could not—back off now.

So the truck rumbled on, dragging the rumbling trailer, mile after mile over the summer-bleached desert. And mile after mile the car glided along close in the rear of the trailer.

At last the upper waterhole came into sight. Half a mile from it the road was bordered by a stretch of white, sun-crisped grass, free from cactus. Before Bruce realized what was hap-

pening, the car shot up alongside. Out of the tail of his eye he glimpsed Josie, tense at her wheel, with unwavering gaze fixed on the ground ahead.

Once in the lead, she reduced speed until the car was gliding only a few yards in front of the truck. She must have gauged the distance by ear, for she did not look back until the car neared the crossing of the spring wash.

At the top of the down-slope she came so near to a stop that the truck almost collided with the rear of the car. They continued very close together down into the bottom. As they crossed the gravelly bed Corveau peered up the wash.

"Here's the place. Now or never," he muttered.

Bruce clenched his jaw so hard that a corner of tooth cracked off. Truck and trailer were broadside on to shots from the rocks up the wash. One steel-jacketed rifle through a sack of cement, and all might be blown to atoms—truck, trailer and car . . . Josie continued to keep as close as before.

To his astonishment, Bruce saw the car rising before him. Then he felt the front of the truck lift. They had actually crossed the wash—were climbing the far bank. He could not hold

himself from turning to peer up the wash. No sign of any one. Yet at the top of the bank Josie made a narrow circle and returned to her first position in the rear.

"No," remarked Corveau as he rolled a cigarette. "Pat ain't gone *loco*—yet."

A mile beyond the wash Josie again took the lead. This time she did not trouble to keep very close. Yet she seemed not altogether certain that the danger was passed. Near the ranch she permitted Bruce to narrow the distance between them.

From the inevitable rocking chair in the veranda Mrs. Lomax glared sourly at the procession. Josie waved to her, but drove past without stopping.

Through the open window of the barn loft came a mirrorlike flash. Corveau chuckled.

"Bill's field glasses can't be working to suit him. They're showing how bad his fond expectations of our bustedness were exaggerated."

Bruce expected Josie to turn the car in at the barn. It kept straight on along the road.

"She figgers mebbe they switched on her—went to get us up toward the valley," surmised Corveau.

After a time Bruce looked back and saw no one following.

"You may as well call and tell Jo she need go no farther," he said. "If Lomax thought she stood any risk, he'd be coming fast to head her off."

"Not if it meant risk to Bill Lomax. Bet on him to keep his beak out of this pot."

"We're as big cowards to let her keep on!"

" 'Tain't a case of letting, buddy. Thought you savvied that. The daughter of her dad will keep going till she's good and ready to turn 'round."

This was too self-evident to be disputed. Bruce lowered his gaze so that he no longer saw above the rear tires of the piloting car. He could at least continue to drive with utmost care and thereby do all that lay in his power to lessen Josie's danger. But under his mingled feeling of dread for her safety and intense admiration for her courage smarted a no less intense shame that his own safety had been, or was being, purchased at the risk of her life.

On crossing the trail arroyo she repeated the maneuvers that she had followed at the spring wash. Bruce's fear for her flamed into a white heat of anger against O'Keefe and Lomax. . . . Yet they were only the employees of March.

After all, the owner of the Bar L was the

one most at fault for this great danger to his daughter. There was no give and take about him. His rule or ruin stand had forced the fight. . . . Well, this time he should be the one to meet ruin—unless he should first admit defeat. Josie must not be sacrificed to Lomax.

At the turn into the gap the cars would have been within range of a plunging rifle fire from the corner crest of the red porphyry front ridge. But no bullets sang down from the top of the broken cliffs. All danger was near an end. Josie had won.

Close to the padlocked wire gate, where absence of cactus promised a punctureless turning, she swerved out of the road. Bruce shut off his engine and jumped. Before Josie could swing her car on around and dash clear, he was within reach. He sprang upon the running board at her elbow. She threw out the gear, but spoke without facing him:

"If you please, Mr. Stanhope, I must go back now."

"Not until you've heard me, Jo. Sid, open the gate and scout ahead."

Corveau waved his hat toward the girl as he swung down.

"*Adios, señorita! Mil gracias.* I never did

hanker nohow for to dissipate into my constitutional elements."

Josie smiled rather wanly.

"I happened to leave a package in the car. When I remembered and went out to the barn for it, I overheard some of the men talking about—about the two who had gone to lay for you. So I ran the car out and went to meet you, before any one could stop me."

"It's beyond thanks——" Bruce's voice grew husky—"far beyond thanks—what you've done for us, dearest."

She shrank from him, her pale cheeks suddenly scarlet, her brown eyes wide with bewilderment.

"You—you have no right to call me—that!"

"Every right in the world."

"No. You made me choose. So now we can never——"

"Don't say it, Jo! After what you've done to-day!"

Her rosy lips pinched together in an attempt at severity.

"I did it for dad. He never would have allowed them to do anything so frightful."

"Only for your father? Then, if it had not been for him, you would have remained at home?"

The girl whirled upon him in a flare of horrified indignation.

"Oh! How can you? As if I could ever forget!"

What she never could forget he saw in her grief-stricken eyes. He laid his gloved hand upon hers.

"Hear me, Jo. We belong to each other. Your father will not listen to right or reason. All he understands is strength—power—might. I am going to make him give us his consent."

"You can't!" The girl's voice quavered with hopelessness. "It's impossible! Oh, why did you make me choose?"

"I am going to hit your father," said Bruce. "He has tried to break me. Now I'll break him. There's no other way. It may make you think you hate me. I'll have to risk that. Your father is going to be forced to ask favors. If he won't, then he loses out."

Reproach and indignation gleamed in Josie's darkened eyes.

"I didn't think you revengeful!"

"Revenge? No. It's only a matter of justice to my uncle—to you—to all who have dealings with your father. At present a man can't live near him without trouble. I know what Uncle Pete used to be like. I know you want

me as much as I want you. Whatever happens, don't forget I am going to claim you, on or before your eighteenth birthday."

Her delicious blush as quickly faded.

"If you—if you'll not hit dad at all, Bruce, I'll make it on my birthday."

Bruce let go his tightening clasp of her hand.

"It has to be done. Good-by. Try not to think too hard of me."

She reached gropingly for the gear lever. As he stepped clear, the powerful car lurched forward—but not before he had seen a tear roll down Josie's quivering cheek.

CHAPTER XIX

CORKED

CORVEAU had time to walk up alongside the arroyo, catch and saddle his horse, and ride nearly to the top of the trail, all before the truck and trailer reached the tent. Bruce unloaded the food and drove on up-creek.

At the mouth of the cañon he was overtaken by Corveau, who had loped around from the forks of the trail and descended the steep pitch down which Chico had so surefootedly borne Josie.

"No sign of the Bar L," he reported. "Not so worse, old timer. Here we are, still all together. They must use first-class glue in that T N T. Sun-fried, and fifty odd miles of joggling, but it ain't come apart yet."

"We'll put it where it will," promised Bruce as he began to toss boxes down to his companion.

To load, wire, and tamp the charges in all

the holes prepared for the explosive took more than three days. It also took a large part of the T N T, for the holes included crevices and potholes gouged in the rock by the water during its age-long cutting of the cañon. With the aid of ropes and platforms of green timber laid from the holes in the pinnacle to opposite holes in the near cliff wall, the two had managed to drill out the various sized pockets in the chimney rock, at frequent intervals, for almost half way up its two hundred feet of height.

On the fourth day Bruce sent Corveau for a look from the crest of the front ridge. He felt certain that no attempt to cut the fences would be made unless cattle had been driven up from the lower range. What use to cut wire if the herd were not at hand to be rushed into the valley?

He was no less sure that, after Josie's frustration of the last plot, no attack would be undertaken for some time by Lomax and his gunmen. But he wished an excuse to get his friend away from the cañon. Otherwise Corveau would insist upon touching off the blasts.

The insulated wire scarcely reached around the first jut of the cañon wall down-stream from the chimney rock. The explosions might jar loose boulders from the cliff top, or fragments

of the shattered pinnacle might ricochet down around the bend.

So Bruce omitted to mention that he intended to fire the mines at once. What need to endanger two lives? He went down to the mouth of the cañon with Corveau and busied himself about the intake of the ditch until the happy-go-lucky singer caroled himself off aslant the north end of the valley.

To disconnect the battery of the truck and carry it up the cañon required only a few minutes. He took a last look at the chimney rock. Set between the narrow precipices that towered two or three hundred feet above its tip, the great splinter of rock did not seem so very high. The massiveness of the unbroken cliff walls on either side and its relative slenderness when viewed edgewise, gave it a frail, unsubstantial appearance. Yet from gorge bottom to upper point, the slim monolith rose as high as a twenty-story building. Its seemingly slight bulk really was enormous.

As Bruce considered how far down-cañon the uppermost fragments might be hurled, he wished with all his heart that he had provided double the length of wire. The risk was even greater than he had realized. On the other hand, a delay while more wire was being brought from

Ariquito might result in failure of the entire plan. Suppose, while he was away, the Bar L should kill Corveau and take possession of all the valley?

Nerved to action by the thought, he walked quickly down to the battery and made a partial connection. Then, on tiptoe and with mouth half open to save his ear drums, he grasped the end of the remaining wire in his gloved hand and thrust the uncovered copper tip toward the connecting screw of the battery.

At a half inch he paused to draw in his breath. . . . Only that scant half inch between him and a possible swift death!

The pause had been involuntary. It lasted hardly two seconds. Steady handed, deliberate, he moved the wire forward and laid it against the shank of the battery screw——

A spluttering of tiny sparks—*Chaos!* . . . Simultaneous detonations of charges that totaled more than three tons of T N T—a titanic explosion confined in the narrow depths of the gorge—a stupendous roar. . . .

Hurled over by the frightful blast, Bruce lay stunned, deafened, scarce conscious. And into the din of the reverberating thunder smashed a thudding, crashing shock of sound still more stupendous than the road of the explosion. The

very precipices appeared to reel above Bruce's dazed eyes—reel and vanish in a fierce *swoosh* of dust and flying rocks.

When he recovered consciousness the hush of the desert filled all the cañon. His clothes were in tatters, rent by the concussion of the explosion, torn by flying bits of stone. All his back had been cut and bruised.

Heedless of the sting and ache of his many small injuries, he struggled to his feet. So far as he could tell, no bones had been broken. Still half dazed, he stared at the jagged fragments of a huge boulder that must have been hurled down and shattered not two yards below the spot where he had fallen. . . . But a miss is as good as a mile.

He pulled himself together and started up-cañon, slowly and cautiously, as if about to face a wild beast. Midway around the turn he stopped short, his wondering eyes upraised. He had expected to see a barrier heap of boulders forty or fifty feet high.

The heap was there. Its height was little more than thirty feet. But above it rose something more—an outleaning cliff nearly fifty feet higher. With its lower half blown from under it in big and little fragments, the remainder of the pinnacle had dropped the full hundred feet

in a solid mass. Part of the bottom had been shattered by the terrific impact. Part above had broken off. But the main piece had wedged fast, unshattered, in the pinch of the narrow gorge.

Corveau raced his horse to the mouth of the cañon, his quirt slashing from side to side, his spurs digging in at every jump. The horse clattered up the cañon at a mad speed that did not slacken all the way to the narrows.

Down the gorge re-echoed a long-drawn yell of triumph: *"Whoopee-ee-ee!"*

Quirt and spurs ceased their tormenting. A tug of the curb slowed the rush of the horse. Corveau jumped off among the first rock fragments, below the truck battery. He sprinted around the turn, the flaps of his leather chaps wriggling like grotesque abortive wings. As with Bruce, the first sight of the dam brought him up short. He stood gaping.

"Ee-ee-yow!" he gasped.

Above, under the overhang of the new cross-wall cliff, an arm beckoned. Corveau scrambled up the slope of sharp-edged stones that varied in size from huge boulders to tiny fragments. At the top his first glance was for Bruce.

"Man alive! Where'd you meet up with a bobcat?"

The query was as empty air to Bruce. He pointed at the out-leaning rock.

"Look at that, my son. She skewgeed coming down—struck almost broadside in the squeeze—jammed and ground into the walls. I can't see a leak-hole anywhere for at least forty feet up. As for underneath, well, she lit so hard on what dropped first that I'll eat my hat if it isn't too hard packed to let through a drop."

"Corked!" muttered Corveau, his mind at last grasping what had happened. "Why, you gumfliggled dammer, ain't you savvied what we've gone and done? It'll take two years' rains to fill our tank so's she'll spill over. Every time we want a drink we'll have to go up and across and down into our waterhole. Our spring has 'most gone dry a'ready."

"Wait and see," said Bruce. "Allowing for the drop of the cañon bottom from the level of the old lake bed down to here, five or six feet up there should mean at least forty on the face of the dam. That means ten feet above the base of this top stopper."

"With forty feet more of her to fill before we get our drink!"

Bruce laid his hand on the outleaning cliff rock at the height of his waist.

"Why not a hole through here? We can at first bore it small at the far end—only large enough to give us water for the ditch. Later on we can enlarge it and put in a headgate——"

"Bore it small?" broke in Corveau. "Don't forget the flow for Windy's waterholes."

"I'm not forgetting March and what is due him," was Bruce's quiet assurance. "Come on. We'll get busy and clean up this job."

Before the end of the day the drilling was under way. But the undertaking proved more difficult than Bruce had expected. To drill holes for charges was one thing. To drill so that the blasts would open up a fairly regular tunnel proved quite another matter.

The fall rains set in before the day when, at last, a deep-exploring drill hole pierced through to the up-cañon side of the great rock. By firing small charges, Bruce thinned the remaining thickness of the stone wall and enlarged the hole to four inches.

Corveau meantime used all the cement to lay an apron for the coming out-gush of water. When called by Bruce to take his first peep through the hole, he was astonished to see a pool already well up the slope of the dam.

"It's filling fast now because all the flow is piling into the cañon pocket," explained Bruce.

"Soon as it rises high as the old lake bed, there will be all that room for it to spread out. The fill will then come by inches instead of yards."

Corveau grinned.

"Even if you bust the hole open right away, Windy is apt to get the wind up. Here it's been raining—but no water in the creek 'cept a little side drainage. You told him our ditch dam wouldn't take his share."

"This will keep while we go ahead on our ditches," replied Bruce.

Enough for Corveau that leaving the hole without enlargement promised trouble. In gay spirits he set to work with Bruce on the main ditch.

Free use of high explosive and of the plows, strung out behind the tractor, soon extended the ditch clear of the cañon mouth, in the shape of a broad shallow trench. Hardly had less rocky ground been reached when a small stream came flowing down-cañon to pile up against the little diversion dam.

The water had continued to rise in the cañon above the big dam much faster than Bruce had calculated. But he did not permit the stream to escape down-creek. It was run out into the ditch to follow the furrows that he hastily plowed along the slope. By watching the flow

behind him, he was able to guess at a fairly even and moderate down-grade.

A stretch of rocks brought the plow to a halt. To save the half-formed ditch from washouts by overflow, the stream had to be turned loose down the creek bed while the rocks were being blasted.

The rain that was falling began to clear as Bruce came back to where Corveau stood over the chugging drill. Across on the trail he saw a big rider, wrapped about in a rain glistening yellow slicker.

"Company," he shouted.

Corveau stopped the drill to jump for his rifle. He took one glance at the distant visitor, and thrust the weapon back into its sheath.

"March—alone!" he cried. "I'll tell the world, he's sure got nerve."

Bruce's eyes glowed with a warmth that they had not shown since his parting from Josie.

"Here's hoping, Sid! If he has come prepared to back down, I'm even willing to——"

"Wait and see, buddy. Don't fool yourself. He's come to bite our heads off."

CHAPTER XX

MARCH WINDS

CORVEAU met March at the trail gate and escorted him to the tent, where Bruce was cooking a noon meal. The visitor stepped in without removing his wet hat or dripping slicker. His face was moist and purplish-red from the chill. His eyes were like ice.

"Buenos dias," greeted Bruce, and he poured a cup of coffee. "Have a seat and a hot swallow while I toss the flapjacks."

"Thanks." The word jerked out, curt and ungracious. But March sat down to gulp the scalding hot coffee. "Notice your corn's up a'ready. Heap of good grass sod spoiled—and seed wasted. One week of drought'll burn out your crop."

"Papago seed," replied Bruce. "Bust three cans of peaches, Sid, and set on the blackstrap. Here we are, folks, crisp and sizzling. Come and get it."

For a time all three were too busy eating for words. But with the bacon and cakes out of the way and his can of peaches half emptied, the visitor found speech.

"Came up the gap first," he growled. "Gate locked. Raining too hard to signal you. Had to ride 'round over the ridge."

"Have another sip of coffee," invited Bruce and he filled the visitor's cup for the fourth time.

"Range must be greening up right smart," remarked Corveau. "How's Pat?"

March was in no mood for banter. He frowned at Bruce.

"What've you done to the creek? Only a trickle. Ought to be running bank-full after all the rain we've had."

"I'll show you," said Bruce. "Is that all you have come for?"

"Yes. You're stealing my water. I'm here to stop you."

Bruce's eyes hardened. As he led the way out of the tent, his gaze turned to his uncle's grave. March also looked, but at once faced away up the arroyo. As the three rode along the bank he noticed the small stream now running in the creek bed.

"Turned loose a little bit of it now, have you?" he growled.

"No more is coming, Mr. March."

The cattleman stared. "What's that?"

"You will see for yourself."

Nearing the cañon mouth the visitor scrutinized the half-dug ditch, the intake, and the low dam.

"You didn't lie about this," he admitted. "Even with your ditch finished, that picayune wall couldn't dam the creek a quarter hour—if it was flowing natural. But what's the matter with the flow?"

Without reply Bruce led on into the cañon. When they came splashing up the shallow rill through the narrowest gorge he dismounted below the last turn. The unwaterworn fragments of the smashed boulder caught March's eyes. He craned his thick neck to peer aloft at the cliff top, frowned, and swung off to follow the leader. His uneasy look won a grin from Corveau, who came up to wade alongside him, humming a doggerel ditty.

They turned the bend. March halted as if struck, jumped forward to take in all the barrier of fallen rock, and halted again, too amazed to speak. At the top Bruce pointed into the

tunnel, from which spurted a four-inch jet of water.

"See for yourself," he said. "No more can come through. We blasted that much of a hole. I doubt if one year's rains will fill up over the crest. There's all the valley above for the creek to spread out in."

March backed off and glared up the wall of solid rock.

"The Needle," he muttered. "Must be the Needle. It's fallen."

"Yes," said Bruce. "This is what our load of T N T was for. We mined the Needle—blew it down."

"You blew——" Comprehension burst upon March. His neck began to swell.

"Cañon choked. My water shut off," he rumbled. "Didn't take you for a liar, Stanhope. You told me I'd have my water. Said you'd use only the waste."

"When did I say that?" retorted Bruce. "You know when and why. I had come to you with Jo. I thought we had squared accounts and that I could deal with you. Then your step-sister told the truth. One of your men shot down my uncle when his hands were up,

and you never turned a finger to see the killer hanged."

"Find out who he is and swear out a warrant," challenged March. "I'll testify to the facts—all the facts. You can't get a jury that'll hang a man for shooting a caught brand-blotter. It would be the same if we hadn't been a posse—if we had lynched him, way we used to string up all rustlers."

"I know," said Bruce. "You're safe from the law. That's why I'm going to rope and bust you my own way. It's not alone the murder—nor the fact that you keep on men who have at least twice tried to wipe us out."

March's scowl failed to silence Bruce.

"Ever since you first settled on this range you've ridden it and everybody who came near you. You corraled all the creek below the valley and had your man Billings straddle it above the gap."

"Hogged everything in sight," put in the irrepressible Corveau.

"You let Billings sell out to my uncle," went on Bruce. "At that time Uncle Pete was as easy as an old boot. No doubt you thought he'd let you ride him. What followed was your own fault—I'll lay odds to it. I've learned a good

deal about you and your methods, both from others and direct."

March laughed his contempt.

"You'll know more before I get through with you."

"I'll know the point where you either lie down or break," asserted Bruce. "You rid yourself of Uncle Pete. You forced me to sell his brand. Now I'm going to rid the range of you and your brand."

"Turn your wolf loose," invited March. "Sight of good it'll do you with Jo if you send me home feet first."

"Don't worry. The day she saved us from your gunmen I gave her my promise not to hurt you—that way."

The volcano erupted: "Dammit! Stand up like a man and speak out. What's your game?"

"See for yourself. I've corraled all the water of this creek. Not a drop runs down to your holes this year, next year, or any year, till you come and ask for it—with your hat off."

The roar of March's curse re-echoed up the precipices like the bellowing of a dozen bulls. Rage burst the last bonds of discretion.

"My water! Steal my water! I'll land you in the pen! I'll brand your hide to the bone!"

Bruce stepped between the furious curser and Corveau, whose eyes showed white under their contracting irises.

"It's your move next, Mr. March," he replied. "Happens you never filed on the water. We have—and also on a reservoir site. We own enough land to use all the flow. My lawyer called it a *bona fide* irrigation project. I fail to see Sid and me behind the bars."

Spoken with such quiet coolness, the disclosure chilled March's rage. Instead of goading him to greater fury, the blow stunned him out of his violence—left him dumfounded, groping for a retort.

"Now you begin to see," went on Bruce. "You can't enjoin us from building our dam. It's already built. Like your fence case, your civil suit for part of the water may win in the end. You can afford to hire smarter law sharps than we can. All right. Go ahead and sue. Meanwhile, we'll irrigate our crops, and dust will blow in your waterholes."

March turned his broad back and went striding down the rough slope of shattered rock.

"Whee!" murmured Corveau. "What if he slips! Him going that reckless—and readier to bust than a keg of T N T!"

They followed him down the sharp-edged stones at a gait less ruinous to boot leather. Both thought it advisable to keep in sight of him. No telling what he would do in his superheated rage. But he mounted his horse and jogged slowly down the cañon without a single backward look.

CHAPTER XXI

INTIMATIONS

HAD March been all that Corveau believed him to be, the quarrel would quickly have come to a head. Even Bruce thought best to be ready to meet an immediate attack.

While he continued with the blasting and plowing of the ditch, he posted Corveau on the crest of the front ridge to watch out against the Bar L. A camp was set up in the mouth of the cañon, so that at night they could not be surrounded and taken by surprise.

But much to the disappointment of Corveau, no attempt was made to rush the valley. All cattle were kept far down the creek, beyond eyesight even from the top of the mountain. And each morning, when the watchman rode the fence lines before climbing the trail, he found not a single strand of wire cut.

Bruce, on the other hand, was greatly pleased over the delay. Every day gained meant many

more yards of additional ditch. Thanks to the power drill, the almost unlimited supply of T N T, and the tractor plows, he was able to accomplish a great deal single-handed.

The days followed along. They began to run into weeks. All over the more than six hundred acres of plowed land the sprouted corn shot up with amazing rapidity. Yet still March made no visible move.

Bruce finished the first cutting of the main ditch around the curve of the valley's slope from the cañon. It was broad and shallow—little more than a deep triple furrow with some of the dirt thrown up on the lower side. But it answered his purpose. All the flow from the four-inch hole in the big dam ran down the furrows and was absorbed into the subsoil. Later on a drag could be used that would deepen the trench and throw up the dirt to heighten the bank on the lower side.

He postponed work on the lateral ditches and climbed the cañon ridge for a look at the reservoir valley. The rains had greened up the scant vegetation of the steep slope. On top he even found flowers blooming between the tufts of new grass, and the cedars had a fresh clean look.

His interest, however, centered upon the old lake basin. A sheet of water had over-spread the flat bottom, from the cañon head all the way to the narrows of the upper valley. He found a rocky chute down which he could descend to the lower corner of the lake. Only the tips of the willows stood above the surface of the water.

A more risky climb, up above along the brink of the cañon, brought him to where he could glimpse a corner of the far end of the dam. The water had risen to within a few feet of the top. The cañon bed was lower at this point than he had thought.

He rode around over the ridges to tell Corveau what he had discovered.

"No wonder that hole is spouting so hard," he concluded. "The water has already piled up several feet above it."

"She'll be spilling over the top before the end of the rains. Then what?" asked Corveau.

"We'll run it all out in our ditches, Sid. Our dry subsoil will soak up every drop of overflow, this year at least. In time the land might become waterlogged. But no need to worry about that now."

"Buddy, at times you sure do show almost

human intelligence. What's next on the program while we wait for to be blowed off the earth by Windy?"

"I could start in on the lateral ditches. First, though, I'd like to examine the top of the dam."

"Go to it," urged Corveau. "If you find the jump from the bottom side too tall, you might let yourself down the cliff on a rope—just keep cutting off the top end and tying it on below. I'll guarantee you'll get down quick if you try that way. Or you might start sprouting wings."

"The tarps are waterproof. Why not a canvas boat?" said Bruce. "I saw one on the Colorado."

Corveau threw up his hands.

" 'Scuse me, boss. I'll fork any broncho you can cinch a saddle on. I'll engage to stay with him—leastways till the first jump. But you don't catch me riding the ocean wave. Water's all right in soup and wash basins——"

He stopped to peer westward over the cedar tops.

"Glint of light on the next rise! Mebbe they think they can crawl up on us from behind. Might have if the sun hadn't come out. That glint is a dead give-away. Let's fade."

Bruce led slowly along the ridge. Once be-

hind a mass of crest rocks, they circled fast and took up a position that commanded the trail. Rifles in hand, they stared down at the bare spaces between the scraggy, low-growing cedars.

Around the twist of the trail floated a big black mushroom with a shining centre dot. Below and in front appeared the ears of a horse. Corveau gave utterance to a hollow groan:

"*Uhuu!* 'Nother twitter of our Rocky Mountain Canary!"

Oliver Bray jogged forward, pleasantly shaded from the hot sun by the umbrella that he had brought along to shed the rain. The polished steel of its tip continued to glint and flash in the bright rays. After him, out of the screening cedars, rode a smaller man.

Corveau crouched again, rifle half raised.

"Sit tight," he warned. "Looks sort of like a warrant this time. Mebbe Pierse figgers on using Ollie for a blind. See any signs of a posse?"

"No. Keep him covered. I'll go down and powwow."

Chico took the jump-offs at a pace that landed him in the trail as Bray rounded the turn ahead. The discreet recorder waved his umbrella at Bruce.

"Good afternoon, Stanhope," he greeted.

"Delighted to see you. Mr. Pierson has papers to serve on you and Sid."

"Civil suit," added the sheriff.

Bruce eyed him closely.

"Want my gun?" he asked.

"No. Mr. March has had his law sharp combing the statutes to dig up a criminal charge that could be made to stick. Looks like you been too cute to get noosed that-away."

"I'm betting on my own law sharp—you'll put up overnight with us?"

Bray smiled condescendingly.

"Oh, no, thank you just the same, Stanhope. We have business at the Bar L—business—and pleasure. The last time I saw Miss Josephine in town she urged me to call. It would be bad form, would it not, to disappoint her, when she is going away so soon?"

Though Bruce's heart skipped a beat, his voice sounded politely indifferent:

"Wasn't she to wait till over Christmas?"

"Indeed, no! One enters college at the beginning of the school year, you know."

"That's so. But what does Bill Lomax have to say about it?"

The self-satisfied look on Bray's face broadened into a smirk.

"Between us, Stanhope, his name should be pronounced Lummix. She has virtually confidded to me that such is her opinion of him. Even now I have reason to believe that her choice is fixed upon a certain person of culture and gentlemanly refinement. No rough, raw ranger or nester——"

"Here's your papers, Stanhope," broke in the sheriff. "I got to trot along to where I can get a let-up. I love Ollie a whole lot. But if this keeps on, I'm bound to admit that envy of his delicate fabric is mighty apt to drive me too far. I'm hankering to skin him and make me a satin vest."

Bray lifted his eyebrows and rode on ahead. The sheriff narrowed his eyes at Bruce.

"Reckon Mr. March wouldn't mourn to lose O'Keefe and one or two others. Nor Bill wouldn't, neither. Bill don't look right pert of late. . . . Pity you're in the wrong camp. March'd be mighty tickled to have you come over. Trust him to size up a real topman."

"Thanks. You can tell him for me I'm riding *on top.*"

"Now, now, son. You know he won't ask for his water. He can't. It's plumb ag'in' his nature."

"How about Uncle Pete? *Adios.*"

Pierson shook his head regretfully as he started on after Bray. Matters had come to a deadlock. The young man would not budge; March would not budge. It looked as if March had at last met his match. Haines's nephew was in the saddle, and he had the look of a real broncho buster. . . .

When Corveau rode down to the trail Bruce reached for his bridle.

"Pierson is trying to smooth things over. There'll be an election some day, and March's cinch on the county isn't as tight as it was. No chance of an attack while Pierson is at the ranch. I'll hit out for town and get this new case into the hands of our lawyer. If we stave off the Bar L for one season, that will settle it. The more supplies we have the better."

Corveau slid off his horse.

"Load him till he grunts. It ain't so much fun scrapping when chuck runs short."

CHAPTER XXII

THE LEMON

BRUCE came back from town with all the supplies the horses could pack—and a budget of news.

"The old judge is playing no favorites, Sid. He put the hobbles on our lawyer. The fence case comes up for trial next month. But win or lose, it's going to be appealed. We can hold off trial of the water case as long or longer, and it can be kept in the upper courts a year or more."

Corveau patted one of his revolvers.

"That's trial by a twelve jury. What's the chance of trial by a six?"

"I heard that the rains haven't done much to lift the low water in the Bar L holes—and the weather man forecasts a drought."

"My, my! You don't say! Poor old Windy! Well, he couldn't expect the luck to run his way forever. 'Bout time he had a few lean years, after all his fat ones. Short rains spell short grazing, well as short water."

"Yes—force his hand quicker. But even if the rains keep up, he'll run dry before many months. All we need do is stand pat."

"How 'bout Miss Jo?"

Bruce smiled with all his old genial good humor.

"I learned that she is going to the agricultural college where I worked my way for two years. It's in my mind I once told her they have a special course for farm housewives."

"I get you, buddy. Signs read *bueno* for you—her making choice of that school."

The prospects sent Bruce back to work with a will. His first task was to pack one of the big tarpaulins up to the head of the reservoir lake and stretch it on a rough boat-frame of lashed willow and ocatilla stems. It was a crude, lopsided craft. But it proved watertight, and the broad, flat bottom amidships made it fairly safe even for an amateur paddler.

He set out on his first trip in a dead calm, edging his way close along one steep shore. Soon, however, the sight of an up-jutting boulder warned him that other sharp rocks below the surface might rip the bottom of the boat. He sheered off and paddled straight for the cañon.

Total absence of current had permitted set-

tling of the silt washed from the upper valley. Bruce could look down through the clear water and see not only the feathery foliage of the drowned willows, but every reed and bulrush.

Near the head of the cañon he slowed his strokes. The height of the precipices made the cleft seemingly pinch in narrower than the width of the boat. He might have backed away had not the lack of any current given him perfect control of his cranky craft. Once inside the fiord he found no difficulty in keeping out from the side walls.

The distance to the dam was not far. Before he realized its nearness, the turn of a bend brought it into view. From this side the enormous block of stone looked to be no more than a small ledge across the bed of the cañon. The steadily rising water had crept up to within ten or twelve feet of the top.

As he glided closer he noticed one of the pockets where the stream in ancient times had gouged into the cliff wall on the inner side of the pinnacle. It was one of the largest of the potholes from which he and Sid had worked when drilling the chimney rock. Its lower edge stood three or four feet above the level of the water.

"Snug hole-in-the-wall if they run us into hiding," he told himself.

He took another stroke and swung the boat broadside to the dam. Gentle sculling brought it close to where the jagged upper edge of the rock offered a level step. He grasped the rough stone and pulled himself out upon it. A corner offered secure fastening for his anchor rope.

Once certain of the boat, he set to examining the dam. In the middle it shelved steeply to the fifty-foot drop-off into the lower cañon. But near the ends he found safe footing from which to peer straight downward.

His first look turned him giddy. The outleaning rock seemed to be topping over under the great pressure of the water above. He fancied himself plunging down with it, to be swirled through the lower cañon in a raging flood far larger than that of the cloud-burst.

To steady his nerves he drew back and examined the crevices between the upper end of the gigantic rock and the walls of the cañon. The terrific impact of the falling pinnacle had so crushed and ground together the rock surfaces from the bottom up that a slit less than five feet deep had been left open at the near end of the dam.

The crevice at the far side gaped wider and

deeper. A few inches more rise of the reservoir, and water would begin to trickle through. But Bruce went back to his boat well satisfied.

"Let it leak," he told Corveau that evening. "Till it stops running we can use all the flow for the corn. Next year at low water, if we are still here, we might fill up both cracks with concrete. I've an idea we can put in a little power plant. Jo will like electricity in the house."

Corveau yawned. His interest went no further than the prospect of an early attack from the Bar L. Nor could he be persuaded to share Bruce's second boat trip to the dam, which was made for the purpose of cacheing a boatload of food and other supplies in the pothole.

After this precaution Bruce returned to the digging of ditches. His plan for laterals required no more than the plowing of deep furrows aslant the slope below the main ditch. As fast as the overflow from the dam increased he had ditches ready to run it into the cornfields.

Before this time the prediction of the weather bureau had come true. The rain clouds no longer banked over the mountains. With their passing, the sun quickly dried up the roots of the new grass. All the prairie flowers withered and crisped and crumbled into dust. The half-

grown grass blades lost their green freshness and began to sear into a sickly yellow.

The drainage from the mountain watershed into the valley of the creek lessened more rapidly than during normal years. Not enough rain had fallen fully to replenish the sources of the springs that usually supplied the creek with a dwindling flow during the dry months.

But the overflow of the reservoir continued and the irrigated corn grew amazingly thick and tall. Bruce began to talk of three crops a year, rotated on the Imperial Valley plan. When he mounted Chico, at gray dawn of the day set for trial of the fence case, he threatened Corveau that, upon his return, he would bombard him with agricultural bulletins.

"Go far's you like, old hayseed," rejoined Corveau. "Even light reading will stop a bullet—if there's enough pages to the story. Trot along now and try to read signs 'stead of books. I hanker for to see my buddykins come back unpuncturated."

But Bruce had no fear of lurkers along the trail. On his last trip to town he had learned that March was keeping O'Keefe and the other new riders of the Bar L out on the lower range with his stock. He now believed that the cattle-

man would not resort to violence until actually short of water.

With a little urging Chico brought him over the mountains and down into Ariquito a full half hour before the opening of court. The stony ridge crests had been hard on the sorrel's shoes. Bruce left him at the blacksmith's shop to be reshod, and walked down-street to the postoffice store.

People were coming out with their morning mail or standing grouped before the building. Several greeted the newcomer with a cordial "Howdy," or the more formal "Good morning." Among these were men of importance, leading citizens of the town.

The nephew of Peter Haines was becoming notable. In the face of the stigma cast upon his family he had proved himself neither an outlaw nor a weakling. He had spent a deal of money on his land and was said to have a big crop under irrigation. Over and above all this, he had more than held his own against the whole Bar L outfit—far more. According to all reports, he had outplayed the redoubtable cowman; had roped him, ready to be hogtied.

Bruce returned the salutations good-humoredly but without visible elation. The many

inquisitive queries about his crop and prospects failed to stop him. He covered his passage into the postoffice with laconic answers that the corn was in the ear and promised to run many bushels to the acre.

Tolliver had not quite finished handing out the mail. He smiled a diplomatic greeting.

Bruce drew out a half-addressed letter from the pocket of his shirt. He put his face close to the little window.

"Morning, Tolliver. Can you favor me with the present address of Miss March?"

"Sorry, Mr. Stanhope. Against postal rules, you know. I can put your letter in the Bar L box and——" The storekeeper's voice dropped to a still lower note. "Why not hand it to her yourself?"

Over his shoulder Bruce saw a brown hat, the top of a pale salmon-pink shirt, and between them a very close-shaven hatchet-face. The thin lips were twisted in an unpleasant smile.

At the elbow of the big foreman appeared a hat that would not have looked out of place in a limousine on Fifth Avenue. Bruce's blue eyes were aglow as he stepped about from the postal window. But Josie did not meet their eager gaze. She stood very still, her face rather pale and her gaze lowered.

Lomax swelled out his chest and made an attempt to imitate his step-uncle's tone of bluff heartiness:

" 'Lo, Stanhope. *Buenas dias.* Glad to see you. Don't know anybody I'd like more to let know I'm due to receive congratulations."

Sudden and hard as was the blow, it failed of its expected effect. For one thing, Bruce did not at once sense the meaning of the statement. An engagement between Josie and her step-cousin had from the first seemed to him too far beyond the range of probability for serious consideration.

Yet why had not Josie gone off to college? Weeks past not only Oliver Bray but all Ariquito had believed she was about to leave. And now she stood silent, avoiding the gaze of the man she loved. She did not seek to deny even with a look or gesture the inference clearly intended by Lomax. Unable to draw her gaze upward, Bruce looked down at her left hand. It was gloved.

The direction of his glance did not escape Lomax.

"Takes time to send on to Chicago," he explained. "Sparkler ain't arrived yet. But it's on its way."

Bruce's smile was exasperatingly cool.

"Well, Mr. Lomax, let's hope for the best. Lots of things are started, but not all of them reach their intended destination. Perhaps I may save waste by keeping my congratulations for Miss March's birthday."

Josie's eyes flashed up in a startled glance. A wave of color dyed her cheeks scarlet. Whatever the signs meant, they failed to reach Bruce. He had stepped forward and was already passing by Lomax on the other side. She bit her lip to stifle a cry for him to wait.

Lomax patted her shoulder.

"You sure have got the makings, Jo, even if you are a lot littler than what I like most. Don't you mind him."

"But—but, Bill, what if he should try to prove you a liar?"

"As how?"

"About our being—engaged."

"Shucks. Ma's had it settled all along, and now your pa has agreed. So long's I'm agreeable, what's to hinder? Wait till you see that solitary diamond. It set me back forty-seven dollars and a half—not counting what the express charges will be."

CHAPTER XXIII

REPENT AT LEISURE

THE trial need not have taken a forenoon. The lawyers dragged it through the day, and would have carried it over to another day but for the old judge's impatience with technicalities.

Half Ariquito crowded into the courtroom—and found small excitement. Hard as the lawyers tried, they could work up no dispute over the facts of the case. March proved that the Bar L had driven cattle in and out through the Grass Valley gap for more than twenty years. The defense proved title to the fenced land, and added proof that the offending fence was upon the officially surveyed boundary of the land.

Every slightest suggestion of a reference to the killing of Haines or the attempt to cut the fence was promptly quashed by the judge. All the sensational features hoped for by the spectators were conspicuous by their absence.

O'Keefe and his fellows had not been brought to town. There were no threats or ugly looks.

Even Windy March sat beside his lawyer strangely quiet. His testimony was given without a single roar or bellow. He looked less at the opposition than at his daughter, who sat so still between her hatchet-faced step aunt and cousin.

Of all the witnesses Mrs. Lomax alone spoke with animosity. Even the combined efforts of Bruce's lawyer and the judge utterly failed to stop her bitter execrations of "that thieving rustler Haines" and his water-stealing nephew.

To all appearances, Bruce sat throughout the tirade quite unmoved. He did not flush nor wince nor even look hard at the vindictive woman. Yet inwardly he was writhing with shame over the public vilification of his uncle. He would rather have been flayed alive.

When the lawyers began to argue the case Bruce left the court-room. Discussion of the law and evidence did not interest him. The one important fact was that, win or lose, March could not force a right of way until the case had gone through the highest court of the state. Whatever the final decision, it would come too late to save the big cattleman from great loss, if not from ruin.

The thought soothed the smarting of Bruce's humiliation. Mrs. Lomax had branded him afresh with the stigma that had been put upon his uncle. March should pay—not for the poisonous tongue of his step-sister, but for the shooting down of an unarmed man.

Out in the cool, dark corridor light feet scurried behind him on the old Spanish tiles. He whirled about, quick as a puma, his hand at his hip.

"Bruce! It's me!"

Josie checked her darting rush to overtake him. She stood with hands half outstretched, eyes raised in timid appeal.

"Please!" she murmured. "Dad said I could come—to beg your pardon for what Aunt Hetty——"

"Your father?"

"Oh, he isn't apologizing. But he—he didn't like it, Bruce. He'll never stop till he beats you. Yet he's not the kind to scratch."

"So I gathered. . . . It was good of you to come and tell me, Jo."

"Not good. Only——" The brown eyes sank before the compassionate gaze of the blue. "You make it so hard, Bruce!"

"Hard?"

"To—to tell you why I'm—doing—what I'm doing!"

He took her ungloved hands in his calloused palm and patted them as if she had been a grieved child.

"Don't you worry about that, Jo. It doesn't bother me at all."

This time her uplifting eyes were wide with bewilderment.

"Not bothered? When dad tells me I must —must take him!"

"All I expect is that you will marry no one until you are eighteen," said Bruce. "You will then be free to do as you please."

Josie tried to draw her hands away.

"If only I could wait! . . . They kept at me so!—and then dad. . . . I've as good as promised him to go through with it within three months."

"Forced to promise! He has bullied you?"

"No, no, Bruce! It's you, not dad. It's your own hardness, not his. You are trying to break him—I'm afraid you *will* break him!"

"His own fault. He has only to come and ask me for the driveway—and for the water."

"Only? You know he can't! Because then he really would be broken. He would far sooner

lose every head—lose his brand! He will not —cannot beg! You know it, yet you keep on——"

She jerked her hands free. Bruce faced her reproachful gaze with no slightest sign of concession.

"I am being made to pay for what my uncle did. I intend to make others pay. I am going to exact justice for what was done to him."

"Revenge, you mean!" cried the girl, her face aflame with a passion of indignation. "Don't deceive yourself. You'd have forgotten all about your uncle if dad had let you have me. Because he refused you, any excuse will do for trying to ruin and humiliate him! Oh, I thought you so kind, so generous! I thought you really loved me!"

"How about yourself?" Anger blazed up to meet anger. "Lead a man on, then throw him! I believed you honest. . . . God—to look into your eyes and know they lied to me!"

His own eyes were too blinded by the pain of his despair to see the anguish in hers.

The next he knew he was out in the glare of the late afternoon sun, walking heavily up the main street. An acquaintance stepped smilingly from the picture theatre doorway to speak to

him, saw his face, and hurriedly stepped back. A glimpse of himself in the first window beyond told Bruce the reason.

Behind him he heard the shrill cackle of an old man:

"Gosh! Reckon he must 'a' lost the case to Windy."

The ill-natured taunt stung him back into self-command. He forced an outward show of calmness that lasted until Chico had jogged clear of the town. Where the trail struck the sharp pitch of the mountain slope he swung out of his saddle to climb afoot.

The trail was steep, and he set himself a killing pace. He reached the top utterly spent—gasping for breath, staggering, face crimson, veins swollen almost to bursting from the rush of overheated blood. He tottered on across the crest and fell behind a ledge, out of sight of Ariquito.

After a time Chico came wheezing up over the top. He stopped beside his master and nuzzled inquiringly under the brim of the battered hat. Bruce pulled himself half up to put an arm around the sorrel's neck and stroke his dusty forehead.

"You're right, Chico horse," he said. "I still have you—and Sid. . . . And, anyhow, we

can't quit, Chico—we can't and we won't. We're not built that way."

Riding over the ridges in the high clear air, the cloud gradually left his brain. After all, what right had he to blame the girl? She was years younger than himself, and she had been reared under the iron will of her father.

To accuse her of deceit had been unjust—cruel. Though her love had not been real, she must have been sincere in thinking it true love. The first test had come when he had forced her to choose. Even then she had continued to believe her girlish fancy the real thing. . . . And he, too, had believed.

Only in the heat of unreasoning anger could he have believed her other than what she was—as true and loyal and pure-minded as she was lovely. She was utterly incapable of deceit. His accusation had been absolutely without foundation—a brutal lie.

By the time he reached the forks of the trail he was burning with shame and remorse. At sight of Corveau, waiting for him in the gathering dusk of nightfall, he burst out at himself. Corveau listened, nicely balanced between concern and admiration.

"Sure, sure," sympathized the appreciative audience when the flood of invective at last

spent itself. "Course you ought to be bit by a hydrophobia skunk and et by coyotes, only it'd poison the poor innocent critters. But now you've rubbed your nose in the dirt, what you going to do about it?—lay down for Bill and Windy to wipe their boots on you?"

The penitent's jaw snapped shut.

"Wait and see."

In the deepened dusk Corveau's face made only an expressionless blur. But as the horses felt their way down the valley trail he hummed a crooning lullaby. Life promised much to him.

CHAPTER XXIV

A MATTER OF HEALTH

ANOTHER day found Corveau back on watch and Bruce at work irrigating the great field of corn.

At supper time Corveau came down from his outlook post with his face set in a grimace of forced seriousness.

"Guess I'll loan Chico for a little *pasear*," he remarked. "Shouldn't wonder if the Bar L's drifting a herd up from the lower range."

"Why go out?" asked Bruce. "If they're coming, we'll be ready to meet them in the gap."

"Course we will, and I'm betting you them fireworks'll stop any stampede a'going. All the same, I'm curious to look-see what's doing."

Bruce nodded and lapsed into bitter brooding. He knew that his companion must find the eventless days of waiting depressingly dull and monotonous.

A long mile from the Bar L ranch Corveau

eased the pace to a walk. Sounds carry far in the stillness of the desert. After a few minutes he swung off-road on the side opposite the barn and corral. The whinney of a horse might give warning of his approach.

Opposite the barn, whose high roof loomed in a vague blotch against the blue-black sky, he hung his spurs on the saddle horn and dismounted to lead Chico. Unchallenged they circled around back of the bunkhouse and struck in direct to the rear door of the ranch house.

As Corveau calculated, Al, the cook, had finished his day's work and gone to the bunkhouse. Corveau dropped Chico's reins and groped his way into the unlighted kitchen. His foot struck a chair.

Through the open doorways of the dining-room and parlor came the rasping voice of Mrs. Lomax:

"I declare, that lazy cook's still hanging 'round. Well, eavesdroppers never hear any good of themselves. I'll go and put a flea in his ear!"

"Hold on, ma!" The voice of Lomax betrayed more than a hint of alarm. "Mebbe it's Pat. Come up to report on the grass and water. I'll go and——"

"Sit down," ordered March. "You and O'Keefe haven't anything to say that you don't care to speak out before others, have you? Tell him to come in here."

Corveau grinned and advanced through the dining room, walking with a heavy tread. His first look from the doorway into the parlor showed the four members of the family seated around the lamp on the old marble-topped table. All except Josie had turned to face the door. She did not raise her eyes from her book until Corveau chuckled a genial greeting:

"Evening, folks. Guess you wasn't expecting me. Though I'd just drop in for a neighborly howdy. Now, now, ma; please don't yowl, else I'll have to puncture your Willyum right off, 'stead of later on."

March heaved up his big body to confront the intruder.

"What d'you want here? Get out," he ordered.

But Corveau was smiling at Josie. She had risen and started toward him, quiet and fearless. He held out his revolvers to her, butts foremost.

"Here they are, Miss Jo. Only—" the revolvers flipped back into their holsters—"you don't need 'em this time. I didn't come to start

anything, but to head it off. You ain't gone and got hitched with Willyum yet, have you?"

Josie's head went up. Her brown eyes flashed.

"What's that to you, Sid Corveau?"

"Nothing, nothing a-tall, Miss Jo—'cept I sort of gag at you being wasted on a coyote. Hey, Bill, what d'you say to that?"

"I—I say—don't shoot, Sid. We ain't married yet. You can see for yourself she's got on only the diamond one."

The girl's face flushed scarlet with shame. She stepped away from in front of Corveau. He smiled mockingly at Lomax.

"That's good news for you, Bill. You sure are in luck. Now, Mr. March, just behave and lemme have my say. I ain't aiming to poke into fam'ly matters. All I want is for Miss Jo to have what she wants, and the law says she can't have her own say till she's eighteen."

"It's none of your business," growled March. "You get out of here."

Corveau flourished his hat to Josie and Mrs. Lomax.

"*Adios,* ladies. Bill, you heard your boss say 'tain't none of my business. Mebbe, though, it's yourn. All I got to say is, till Miss Jo comes of age, the climate 'round the Bar L is going

to be mighty unhealthy for bridegrooms. Chew on that, Bill. I'm going now, Mr. March, and I'm going quiet-like—unless you want a batch of badly spoiled cowboys."

He stepped back and disappeared. On the instant Lomax sprang to his feet, pistol in hand. Josie stared at him, caught between doubt and amazed approval. She flung out her hand toward the front door.

"Quick! Around the house! . . . I'll marry you to-morrow!"

Instead of spurring Lomax on, the offer brought him up like the jerk of a Spanish bit. He lowered the pistol.

"Shoot a man in the dark? I'm surprised at you, Jo. Besides, they let Uncle Wynn go when he went to the valley."

March sat down heavily, his face purpling.

"Murderous young devil!" he muttered.

Mrs. Lomax found her tongue. "Wy—Wynn, you'll not let him get William!"

"Oh, Sid ain't going to hurt me, ma," reassured her son. "After all, he's right. Jo oughtn't to be rushed into marrying me till she's good and ready."

"Thank you, Bill. I'll try to be thoughtful of your health," scoffed Josie.

She hurried to her room, to fling herself down

upon her bed in an agony of grief and shame. Bruce had doubted her love—scorned her. And now Bill had proved himself a rank coward.

Out in the bunkhouse the cook and another man were intent upon a game of poker. The door softly opened and closed. Al looked up and froze motionless. The other man saw the fear in the eyes of his companion and slowly turned around to look toward the door.

Corveau met him with a cheerful grin.

"That's the way, Lefty—slow and easy. And please oblige me by keeping your hands on the table. You, too, Al. I'm sort of nervous tonight. Where's the rest of the bunch?

"Lower range," answered Lefty. He added plaintively, "You ain't got nothing ag'in' me, Sid. I don't side with Pat."

"Not just now you don't—nor Al, neither. No chance to shoot me in the back. Didn't drop in, though, to swap compliments. I'm here on business. My boss is dealing in water. What d'you know 'bout the holes? Cough up."

Lefty hastened to apologize.

"All me and Al knows is what Pat said last time he come up. Both lower holes together won't last more'n two months, and the grazing is poor a'ready."

"Upper hole?"

"Nobody's told me. I guess mebbe a month or three weeks if they was drinking all head at it. What say, Al?"

"Me?" The cook spat a streak of tobacco juice at the sand box. "I'd say, some Grass Valley gents has got the Bar L by the tail, and a down-hill pull. What I don't savvy, Sid, is your boss hitting at the old man, 'stead of Bill. 'Pears like he'd go after Bill first."

"Mebbe he ain't heard all the news yet," suggested Corveau.

"*Huh!* You don't say you never wised him to the whole deal?"

"Take me for a skunk? I agreed to keep my lip sewed up, didn't I? Besides, how long do you think me and him'd stay hitched if he knowed?"

Lefty looked mystified. The quicker Al caught the point.

"I savvy. All the bunch thought you'd gone and leaked. Guess even Pat won't feel so sore at you now."

"Sure," mocked Corveau. "He'll come and feed out of my hand—'fore I get done with him. Your whole outfit, from Windy down, is going to be rode by a pair of busters. I just put my bridle on Bill. He took the curb real gentle."

Again Al spat. "Him! . . . If we'd 'a' had Pat for foreman——!"

"Oh, well, mebbe even Bill will fight when he's cornered. Here's hoping."

As Corveau spoke he turned with seeming carelessness to open the door. But the two men lacked nerve to make any move. He grinned and slipped out into the night.

CHAPTER XXV

LIGHT IN THE DARKNESS

AT breakfast Corveau began his report with what he had learned about the water-holes.

"Three months' water," said Bruce. "Much can happen in three months."

"Hope so, buddy. Here's some more to cherk you up. 'Fore I dropped in at the bunk-house I asked Bill please not to get his boot soles hot a-hurrying to hitch up with Miss Jo."

Bruce crimsoned with chagrin.

"Who told you to cut in on my affairs?"

"As how?" protested Corveau, his face the picture of injured innocence. "Nobody said *boo* about you. I just wanted to let Bill know that hurry was apt to be hard on his health."

"They will think I sent you. I have no right to interfere with what Miss March wishes to do."

"Well, I have, buddy. Leastways I think I have. Happens I know Bill. He ain't fit to

wipe her little boots. He'll take my advice, or he'll take what's coming to him."

"He will do what March decides."

"Mebbeso—and yet mebbe you need another guess. Bill thinks a whole lot of his own hide."

Bruce shook his head and went to his work, still hot with mortification. After the way he had broken off with Josie—after his unjust scathing accusation—how she must now despise him for this insolent interference by Corveau! Worse still, she would think that he had sent Corveau to make the threat for him, and had himself skulked at a safe distance.

The certainty of her scorn did not lessen in the days and weeks that followed. He considered Corveau's attempt to aid him as futile as it had been well-meant. March would be all the more apt to force an early marriage.

At first the work gave him something else to think about. He had to ride the ditches off and on from dawn to dark, repairing the breaks made by overflows during the night, shutting off the water at one place, and turning it into other laterals. There was also the need every day of inspecting the great field to see that no patches showed signs of burning out.

But with the advance of the drought the creek

above the reservoir lake dried up, and soon afterward the overflow of the dam ceased. The stream in the lower cañon dwindled to what spouted from the four-inch hole. This was far from enough for so large an irrigated crop.

Grown with copious surface wetting, the corn had not struck deep root. The luxuriant plants called for quantities of moisture. As soon as the ground caked, they wilted. The grain, however, had already begun to harden on the cobs. There was no need to enlarge the hole in the dam.

Tests of different parts of the field led Bruce to estimate the crop at ninety per cent. His risky adventure had proved a big success. The corn could now safely be left on the drying stalks, to be harvested at any time before the next rains.

Yet their success brought as little satisfaction to him as to Corveau. Neither gave thought to the money they should receive from their corn when it could be shelled and hauled to Ariquito. Corveau fretted over the long wait for the Bar L to be forced into action. Bruce began to brood.

He now had no work to keep his mind off his troubles. His weight lessened. He took to ly-

ing around camp, silent, almost morose. No arguing by Corveau could persuade him to join in the watch from the ridge crest.

When he refused repeated urgings to go into town for the news, Corveau became alarmed.

"All right, you locoed buckaroo. Sit here till you dry up and blow away. I'll go my ownself."

Bruce tossed him a wad of bank notes. At sundown Corveau jogged back and found his friend brooding beside his uncle's grave. He waved a cheerful greeting.

"Buck up, buddy. No wedding bells yet at the Bar L. I take it, Bill's health feels sort of delicate."

"Forget that, will you?" muttered Bruce. "I'm nothing to her. What she does isn't any of my business."

"No, nor what I do—it looks like!" retorted Corveau. He pulled out an unopened quart flask. "See that? It's real hellfire—bootleg *mescal.* I voted dry, and I've stayed dry. You said you wanted me to side you. I took your word for it; you took mine. Are you keeping yourn? Why should I keep mine when my buddy's gone back on me?"

Bruce's lax body tensed. He sprang up to

thrust out his hand. "You're right, Sid! I've been a fool!"

"Sure," agreed Corveau. "What's more, any man who goes to pieces 'cause a girl throws him, just proves her good judgment. I've got my hellfire. You've got yourn. Throw it over your shoulder—thisaway."

He flung the flask of *mescal* up backward, whirled, and fired with both revolvers. The fragments of glass showered down into the arroyo along with the foul-odored liquor. Bruce smiled—for the first time in weeks.

"Not so bad, Sid. You don't have to be drunk to shoot."

"That's what Pat'll find. . . . They kept bringing the stuff out to the ranch. . . . Lord —it's great siding a white man!"

Sunrise found Bruce riding up the trail with his buddy. He had slept well. The jolt of Corveau's object lesson had jarred him out of his black mood—had swept away all the clotted poisons of his morbid brooding.

As if in response to this change in him, their first view from the ridge crest showed a change down on the range. All the great plain toward the ranch was dotted with grazing cattle.

"Glory be!" cried Corveau. "We're round-

ing 'em up. Lower holes gone dry. Not long now before we get action."

No more was needed to key Bruce above all chance of lapsing into his black mood. The Bar L might strike at once. They hardly would wait until the upper waterhole had been drained dry by the thousands of thirsty cattle.

He left Corveau on watch and set off over the ridges to the reservoir. The canvas boat lay where he had left it, bottom up on a gravel bar at the head of the lake. He screened it over with driftwood brush, and rode back to Corveau without troubling to visit the dam.

They divided the time into six-hour watches, two during the day and two at night. Off-watch there was nothing to do but eat, sleep, and tinker on the preparations for the expected attack.

A week passed without a sign from the Bar L. Twice men rode up near the gap. But their purpose was only to head back down-creek the bunches of cattle that had drifted near the valley.

The second week started no less uneventfully. It dragged along with a peacefulness that set Corveau's teeth on edge. Its fifth day dawned quite as peacefully as those that had gone before. Bruce relieved Corveau at the gap—the

point of greatest danger at night. Then, as usual, he rode up the trail.

On the crest, half an hour after sunrise, he noticed a flashing point of light down in the trail arroyo where it crossed the road. The flashes came in a series of irregular groupings. He went back on a westward crag of the ridge and hoisted a canvas flag where, looking from the valley, it stood out above the skyline, yet could not be seen from the plains.

The flashes were still coming from the arroyo, though at longer intervals, when Corveau spurred his horse up to the head of the trail. He ran to peer over a crest ledge beside Bruce.

"Coming, are they? Where?"

"No, only signals—down the arroyo. What do you make of it?"

A few flashes were enough to stir Corveau's soul.

"Must be meant for us," said Bruce. "That mirror is held so that no one can see the flashes except up here."

Corveau tied his handkerchief to his rifle barrel and waved it overhead. The flashes fairly jiggled, then ceased altogether.

"Thought so," said Corveau. "There she comes. Can't be nobody else. You'll have to go down and meet her."

"I'd rather not, Sid."

"Who's been saying he owes her an apology? Here's your chance."

Nipped fast by the quick rejoinder, Bruce rode down the cleft. Near the halfway point he stopped where a jut of crags hid the trail from below. He peered around and saw Josie only a few yards on down. At sight of his hat she spurred her broncho up the last twist of the trail. She had a hurried, anxious look.

"You must be blind, Sid," she called. "I thought you'd never see. They'll be looking for me if I don't——"

The sentence broke off in the midst. Her horse had swung around the corner of rock to where Bruce stood waiting beside Chico, hat in hand, face flushed.

"I—I'm sorry, Miss March," he said. "And I'm ashamed of behaving as I did there at Ariquito. You're the truest hearted girl in all the world, Jo! I know it wasn't your fault. I know you thought you really loved me. It was just an honest mistake you made."

"Mistake?"

Her startled brown eyes misted over. Their long lashes fluttered and sank. She waited. But he stood silent, too overcome with the sense of the wrong he had done her to see how easily he

could atone. His golden moment passed and was lost.

She looked up, this time with a level glance that told nothing of the conflicting emotions behind her surface calmness.

"So you've found that my feeling was not false, but only mistaken. May I ask if you have just made the wonderful discovery?"

"No—I knew it almost at once—the moment I could think. A man is a fool to get angry, Jo. I acted like a skunk. But when I cooled down it was already too late."

"Is it ever too late to apologize?"

"You wouldn't have listened to me. Besides, you had shown me you did not care. You're bound to hate me, anyway, for breaking your father."

The brown eyes flashed.

"Don't be too sure of that! Feed is cheap up north in the corn-belt. Dad has already found farmers who'll handle every head, on shares. He's away now to get cars for shipping. Maybe we stand to lose some money on the deal, but we'll not be broken. Far from it!"

"I'm right glad to hear that, Jo."

"Glad? But I thought——"

"Saw a bunch of cows down-gap the other

morning. They looked pretty much gantered up. Grass too short and sparse. It's good news to know they're going to where there's plenty of cheap corn."

"You mean, where dad will lose thousands of dollars! You know the old grass in the valley would carry them over for him without a cent of cost."

"Yes, and I've enough cheap corn to put them in prime condition. Trouble is, your father will not deal with me."

Again the brown eyes flashed.

"Not on your terms—never! And of course you'd make them harder, now that you can't get me!"

Bruce deliberated upon this charge, and ended with a shake of his head.

"You don't get the idea, Jo. At first it's true I had you in mind, along with the rest. But you no longer care to get his consent. All I want now is to make him realize that other people have rights he is bound to respect."

"Oh, Bruce! you can say that—you can believe it—when the truth is you only want to be boss yourself—to ride him as he rides others. You men! You're all alike—hard and unforgiving . . . and worse!"

"Jo——"

"It's true. . . . That's why I've had to come. Can you think it's easy to be here after —after what happened at Ariquito? But Bill and his men—Dad is away. . . . If all the herd goes, there'll be no need of men on the ranch. They will stop at nothing. I think it is planned for to-night. . . . That's all."

At the tug of his bridle rein the broncho put his feet together and turned around in the narrow trail like a top.

"Wait!" begged Bruce. "If only you could coax your father to meet me half way——"

Over her shoulder her voice came back to him in a broken, half stifled murmur:

"He will never give way. . . . Don't let them—hurt you!"

The broncho clattered nimbly down the path. A jagged corner of rock came between Bruce's eyes and the downbent head of the girl.

CHAPTER XXVI

OUTMANEUVERED

THE news fired Corveau to joyful excitement. He did not stop to inquire about his friend's apology to Josie.

"Thinks it'll be to-night, does she, *heh?* Oh, boy! We'll be there with both feet. . . . Long head has Windy. Bunch of rude coarse buckaroos rip loose and bust up the nest of the nesters—'g'inst his orders, and him away. Mighty good *alibi!*"

"He's Jo's father, Sid. I'm willing to believe they're doing it on their own hook. You're right, though, about his long head. All he has to do is carry out this feeder deal with the corn-belt farmers. Even with a fifty percent loss, he can out-stay us in the courts. In a year or two he'll win. Easy enough for him to restock his range."

"Well, it's dollars to doughnuts we won't be here to worry about that—'less we keep our eyes peeled. Don't forget it's them or us this

time, buddy. If so be there's any chance of choosing, I claim Pat and Bill for mine."

At dusk the friends rode down into the valley to set the signals that Bruce had perfected. They went on watch for the night at the gap fence.

Dawn found them still waiting for the expected attack.

"Shucks!" Corveau hailed the rising sun. "Jo guessed wrong. Well, all the more chance of luck to-night."

But another night came and went, and still another, without the slightest sign of a move from the Bar L. The strain was more than Corveau could bear. At sundown he made announcement:

"Jo has the savvy. She didn't give us the high sign for nothing. Mebbe Bill has lost his nerve and backed out. But if you ask me, my guess is they got next to her warning us and 're holding off till we get careless. I'm going to look-see."

Bruce made no objection. He knew Corveau well enough to feel sure that any protest would be useless.

"Go to it," he agreed. "Only thing, the moon rises at ten. Hardly gives you time to get back under cover."

A shrug from Corveau, and he rode off down

the gap. Within a few minutes he turned into the dry bed of the creek and was hidden from view. Midway to the ranch, at the coming of nightfall, he circled to the east over a swell of the prairie and followed down a shallow trough, or swale, that swung around half a mile out from the ranch buildings.

He had already passed the bedding ground of many bunches of cattle. As he did not wish to start a stampede he held his horse to a walk and softly hummed a song. Though only a few of the beasts rose as he passed by in the faint starlight, he sensed a restlessness among them all. Ahead he heard a plaintive lowing. His approach to the waterhole was so timed that the moon rose as he led his horse up the intervening swell. He peered over the round, down into the trough of the creek bed. Both above and below the crib dam the bottom was black with a mass of cattle. They filled the basin of the waterhole and all around.

"Dry!" he chuckled.

The distorted desert moon lay upon the skyline of the desolate plains like the battered and blood-streaked yellow face of a Chinese goblin. Its evil light brought out with merciless clearness the gaunt bodies of the cattle—their hollow flanks and washboard ribs. Some stood

with down-sagged heads in silent misery. Others tossed their heads and milled around in vain attempts to force a way into the jam that filled the muddy but waterless basin of the hole.

"My, my!" murmured Corveau. "Looks sort of like Windy has fallen down on his feeder deal. Siddie boy, you best hit the high places."

He faced about down the rear slope of the swell and loped his horse back along the hollow. Failure to see any trace of night herders only added to his haste. His rush through the outlying bunches of cattle brought many to their feet, snorting. But though some started to run, none went far. The luckless beasts were too spiritless from lack of feed and water to be easily stampeded.

Near the gap Corveau struck back into the bed of the creek and rode warily up near the fence. He was surprised when his whistle brought an answering signal from Bruce

"Could have sworn I'd find 'em on top of you," he wound up his report.

"Water all gone, and a forty-mile drive to Ariquito," remarked Bruce. "They're cutting it close."

"Alkali sink twenty-five miles south, near where the railroad swings 'round the end of the mountains," said Corveau. "Bad water, but

deep springs—never run dry. Old stock-chute down thataway. They could water the herd and load 'em aboard the train easy. . . . But Bill wouldn't hang on here so long 'less he bets he can tap our tank."

"That should mean to-night, Sid. Yet they would not have waited until moonrise if——"

Across the valley rolled the boom of an explosion. Over at the base of the inner ridge a red light glared in the shadow of the cliffs.

"Look!" cried Corveau. " 'Taint on the trail —it's the cañon signal. They must have climbed down over the cañon mountain."

Bruce jumped for his saddle.

"Come on. It will take time for them to drill holes for enough powder to do the work. We have a chance. Ride!"

They raced along the narrow way between the arroyo bank and the great field of corn. By rising in their stirrups they could catch occasional glimpses of the cañon mouth, over the dried tassels of the tall cornstalks. The red flare continued to glow against the base of the cliffs.

"They have tried to put out the light," called Bruce. "Don't see any sign of them. May have been a coyote that tripped the trigger."

"Sure—Bill by name," replied Corveau.

"Look at the ditch dam. See that hat top? Two of 'em! They're laying for us."

Bruce led off aslant the field, through the thick of the corn.

The uneven caked surface of the half-leveled furrows made hard going. But the surefooted horses held on with little slackening of their pace.

They burst out of the upper border corn, a quarter-mile to the right of the cañon mouth. Above the edge of the field the lower slope ran up for three or four hundred feet, bare and exposed, before a downthrust comb of rocks offered cover from rifles of the men at the cañon. Hardly had Corveau spurred his horse into the open in a spurt to overtake Chico, when bullets began to ping overhead.

"Too much moonshine," he mocked. "Better swear off. You're all up in the air—can't see straight."

For answer a steel-jacketed bullet ripped the leather wristlet of his bridle hand. Another thwacked the dust under the heels of Chico and shrieked off at an angle.

"R-r-r-ride 'em, cowboy!" yelled Corveau, and he dug in his spurs at every jump.

The leaping of the main ditch threw the horses out of their stride and the Bar L men off

their aim. The last bullets in the magazines of the rifles shrilled past ahead of their marks. Before the men could reload, the sprinting horses had put the tip of the rock comb between their riders and the enemy.

Corveau would have stopped to fire back over the top of the ledges. But Bruce merely pulled in Chico to an easier gait. He angled on up the steepening pitch of the mountain's base. At the start of the hard climbing he swung out of the saddle to lead the way afoot. Corveau followed his example.

Almost as nimble as goats the horses scrambled up the ledges after their masters. The moonlit valley bottom dropped rapidly away below the climbers, for Bruce led at a heartbreaking pace. He spared neither himself nor Corveau nor the horses. All that he had planned and worked for since the beginning of his trouble with March now hung in the balance.

Gasping, outspent, with veins ready to burst, they staggered up on the round of the ridge top. Corveau reeled and would have fallen. He had to be helped by Bruce to mount. But the horses, once on fairly level ground, soon recovered their wind and strength. From a walk they worked into a jog and from the jog into a lope.

The race ended for the willing beasts at the top of the pitch to the head of the reservoir lake. The ride had given Bruce and Corveau time to recover. They jumped off and plunged down the mountain side.

Bruce came first to the canvas boat. He flung off the screening brush and heaved the craft around into the water. Corveau looked sadly from the frail shell of sticks and canvas to the long expanse of the moonlit lake. He would sooner have crawled unarmed into the den of a grizzly. Yet at a gesture from Bruce he lay down in the forepart of the boat.

Bruce pushed off and began to paddle. His first strokes were light and slow. But as the boat glided out over the shimmering water he pulled harder and faster. Behind the wire tension of his muscles was the desperate urge of his will.

The looming mountain banks of the lake—one black-shadowed, the other moon-silvered—rolled steadily to rearward. The boat passed the middle of the lake and swept on down into the lower end. Ahead the cliffs of the cañon inlet suddenly appeared to tower above the little craft. Bruce drove straight at the black slit of the gorge.

"Give us a light, cupped behind," he said.

Corveau, flat on his back, began to light matches, one at a time, and hold them up above the level of the boat's stem. As the boat shot into the cañon, the tiny flares cast their faint glow to the rock walls on either side. Between their guidance and his remembrance of the turns, Bruce was able to drive the boat through the narrow waterway at unslackened speed.

A low murmur ahead quickly swelled into the familiar reverberating swash of the four-inch stream spouting through the hole in the dam. A few more swift paddlestrokes, and Bruce glimpsed the crossledge of rock close ahead. He backed water and swung over to the cañon wall alongside his storage pothole.

His hasty upspring to catch the edge of the hole rocked the boat and brought a *yip* of protest from the startled Corveau. But a few moments of groping gave Bruce what he wanted. The last matches in Corveau's box lighted the boat safe around alongside the dam.

While Bruce held fast to the landing ledge Corveau crawled out of the boat. He lay sprawled flat until Bruce stepped out after him. By that time the clutch of his hands on the solid stone gave him the feel of safe footing. On the instant he became again his usual alert, daring self.

"Hear that?" he whispered. "They're pounding a drill."

"Over this way," said Bruce, and he led to the left end of the dam, lighting the way with matches held low.

They crept out to the front edge of the great rock and peered down. The outlean of the cliff prevented them from seeing the foot. But the rays of a lantern gleamed brightly on the white splurge of the little stream that gushed out of the tunnel in the base of the rock.

Bruce lighted a can of flare powder and dropped it over the edge. It struck hard on the boulders below, burst half open, and dyed all the bottom of the cañon blood-red with its fierce glare.

CHAPTER XXVII

THE WHOLE TRUTH

THE sudden burst of light showed two of the Bar L men—Lefty and Al the cook—at the foot of the rugged dam slope, unloading boxes of T N T from their horses. Both yelled and drew their guns.

Bruce gripped Corveau's out-thrusting rifle. He shouted down to the men below:

"Stick—them — up. We'll — shoot — the — powder."

Both men were fit mates for O'Keefe. They might have faced death from bullets. But the threat of the explosive shook their nerve. They had no fancy for being blown to pieces. Down went their guns, up went their hands.

"Climb," ordered Bruce.

They scrambled up the steep slope of broken rocks, one on each side of the down-rippling little stream. Though no one called out from the tunnel, the clink of the sledge on the drill had stopped. The drillers undoubtedly were star-

ing out at the fire-lit open, too wary to venture from their shelter.

When Al and Lefty reached the top of the slope, Bruce halted them with another command.

"Stop. You're covered. Who's in the tunnel?"

"Pat—and—Bill," shouted back Lefty.

"They're my meat!" yelled Corveau. "Tell 'em to walk out and take their medicine."

Lefty promptly repeated the invitation, no doubt in the hope of being spared if his leaders were punished. The answer from the tunnel plainly dismayed him. He hesitated before shouting it up the cliff.

"It ain't on me. I'm only acting under orders. Pat says—he says—go to hell. They got 'nuff powder to bust her wide open. He says, they'll blow her and stand under the overhang till the rest of our bunch ride up a-top and get you."

Bruce leaned over to call down between his hands.

"Tell them we have a can loaded with powder and stones. We'll toss it out on a rope. The can will swing into the mouth of the tunnel before striking. We give them ten seconds to come out."

"Toss, and be damned!" blared the voice of O'Keefe before Lefty could repeat the threat. "I'll plug her so quick you'll get the dose up there. We ain't going to come out to be shot like sheep."

There was a bare chance that the gunman might be able to make good his boast. Bruce paused to consider.

"I have only one bomb, Sid. Besides, we don't want to kill them that way."

"You're soft," derided Corveau.

Bruce shouted down a compromise.

"You are not a liar, O'Keefe. My word that we let all your bunch go. Your word that you take them off with no harm done."

O'Keefe lunged out into the open, dragging the unwilling Lomax. He had bluffed over the bomb, but he had no more relish than the other men for being blown up.

"Don't hurry Bill thataway, Pat," mocked Corveau. "The big double-crosser wants to light the long fuse 'fore he runs."

Certain that he was about to be shot or bombed, Lomax flung up his claw-crooked hands and yelled with the fury of a cornered rat:

"You snake! Who double-crossed *me? Yah* —sucking around your side-kick! Why don't

you tell him how you helped brand the cows for Haines?"

The position of the taunter, almost directly below, alone saved him from Corveau's first shot. The second flew wild as Bruce grappled with his furious companion. He called urgently:

"Hit out!"

All four Bar L men plunged down the slope of the dam, Lomax a long jump in the lead. Up on the brink of the cliff Corveau writhed and twisted in a terrific effort to break loose. Fortunately for Lomax, if not for O'Keefe and the others, Bruce proved too strong for the smaller man even in his rage.

But the moment the fugitives flung themselves upon their horses and spurred down around the bend, Bruce let go of his struggling prisoner and drew back.

"Have you gone *loco?*" he demanded. "I gave my word to O'Keefe. You heard."

The panting Corveau raged into a torrent of virulent curses against Lomax. When the outburst spent itself with its own violence, Bruce's voice spoke out of the darkness, cold and quiet.

"What did Lomax mean about branding cows for Haines?"

"I'll tell you later," snapped Corveau. "Now you'll let me down. If that skunk had his blast

ready, he lit the fuse. Pat mebbe ain't a liar, but he's hitched up with Bill. I'm going to trail 'em out of the valley. Bring the horses 'round. Then I'll tell you. Savvy?"

Without a word Bruce fetched the fifty-foot anchor rope from the boat. He braced himself near the edge of the cliff and lowered away as soon as Corveau swung over. When the rope went slack, he pulled it up, lighted a flare on the stem of the boat, and paddled back up-cañon.

Two hours before dawn he rode down the trail, with Corveau's horse in lead. Corveau was near the tent, on the opposite side from the grave of Peter Haines. He sat out in the open moonlight on his blanket roll, his head and body drooped forward as if very weary. He spoke without looking up.

"All packed, you see, Mr. Stanhope, ready to pull out. Leastways, though, you can't say I've throwed you. Overtook the bunch at the powder cache. Bill's a smooth talker. He was arguing Pat into blowing up our shack and firing the corn. I put a bullet in close to the cache. They *vamosed muy pronto.* Didn't stop spurring till they had to pull up and cut out through the gap fence."

The terse account ended in a half chuckle. But the spurt of mirth was only momentary. The chuckler lapsed again into glum dejection.

"I care about as much for the crop as you do," said Bruce. "However, you have my thanks."

"If you leave it to me," Corveau muttered, "I'd a deal rather be skinned with a knife."

Bruce had difficulty in holding to his quiet tone.

"It's no more fun for me than for you. Let's get it over with."

"Right you are, Mr. Stanhope!" Corveau stood up, his face drawn and creased as if he had aged twenty years in one night. The cords of his neck twitched.

"I ain't going to make excuses over being tanked up by them when they roped me in on the deal. Booze ain't any justification for crooked work. Bill and Pat didn't have to push hard to get me into it. I knowed old Pete was mighty apt to rip loose, and I hankered for some fun. . . .We three, along with Al and Lefty, made a Box B iron and done all the brand-blotting."

After several moments Bruce asked in a low voice:

"Which of you fired the shot?"

The twisted lips of the tortured man tightened.

"That would be telling. Bill is the only one who's got his *alibi*. He wasn't with the posse."

"*Alibi?* . . . First the brand-blotting, then the lying charge, then the shooting! He was in on the deal. It was cold-blooded murder. You know it. You know every one of you can be sent to the gallows for it—March included."

"Well, I'm not so dead sure—about March, I mean. They never let on to me that he put them up to the blotting."

"What else?" cried Bruce. "All of you, his men—Lomax his nephew—Uncle Pete his enemy for years! Of course he was back of it all!"

"I don't know, Mr. Stanhope. I hope not. He's Miss Jo's daddy."

The reminder quenched Bruce's upflare of wrath.

"Mebbe I done wrong not to tell you all straight out, that morning after we spilled your shack. Only thing, you acted so blamed white, I wanted to side you. I just couldn't own up."

"You've been square since then," conceded Bruce. "I don't know whether it was because your bunch framed you to get the noose if it

turned out I was killed, or whether you merely saw a good chance for what you consider fun. The fact remains that you have stood by me. I give you the credit. But you know, after this, we can no longer be friends."

Corveau's head sagged forward. His shoulders stooped as if under a heavy burden. He slowly bent over and fumbled at the hogging-string with which he had tied up his blanket roll.

"Course you're right," he admitted. "You see I savvied you was done wanting me. I'm ready to *vamose*."

"You are?"

The bowed man straightened suddenly with fierce vigor.

"Yes—and I'm a-going to call by the Bar L on my way. You won't need to worry about that bunch no more. S'long."

He caught up his roll and started to lash it on behind his saddle.

"Just a minute," said Bruce. "I'm not thinking of myself now, or of you or them. It's a question of what's right to Uncle Pete. You helped brand him with a crime he didn't commit. It will not cure that to have you wipe out the whole bunch, even if they kill you, same time."

"I see. You want to do the wiping out your ownself."

"In the right way. Uncle Pete's name shall be cleared. I'll do it by proving what you've told me. That means convicting his murderers. You are going to turn state's evidence."

Corveau shook as if siezed by a fever chill.

"Don't ask me that, buddy. I'll stand up and let you plug me. I don't care shucks 'bout living, long's I can't side you no more. I don't care shucks. . . . Only don't ask me to give away the bunch."

"Bunch of scoundrels!"

"Sure—Bill's a sneaky coyote, Pat a rattler, Al and Lefty skunks. All the same, I was with 'em on it. I'd be a worse skunk to blab."

"How about Uncle Pete? How about leaving him to lie here forever in the grave of a lynched rustler? Much your honor amounts to, shielding murderers and keeping black the name of an honest man!"

"Your uncle—" muttered Corveau. "That's so. It's on you, too! Even Miss Jo, at first—— They'll be throwing it up at you. . . . God A'mighty! It's too much! I'll come through —I'll go the limit . . . Only, I won't ask for no immunity, and nobody asks none for me. If

the bunch hang, I hang. Damned if I'll sell my evidence!"

Bruce thrust out his hand.

"Mr. Corveau, will you side me in helping to arrest them?"

Though Corveau's face blazed with a sudden great joy, he drew back his own hand.

"It's dirty yet. Wait till I've come clean. Let's move. We'll catch 'em asleep."

"No," refused Bruce. "Ariquito first. Warrants sworn out on your affidavit of the facts——"

"But Pierse will throw me into the calaboose. I won't be able to help you rope the bunch."

"Your guns will not clear Uncle Pete's name. Your evidence will."

Corveau fought his last fight with himself, and won.

"I said I'd go the limit. Come on."

CHAPTER XXVIII

GO GET THEM

ARIQUITO was yawning itself into the usual leisurely day of a small cow town when Bruce and Corveau jogged down the main street.

Corveau looked as if he had been on a *mescal* drunk—eyes blood-shot, face gray and haggard, nerves jangled. He was afire with impatience to go through with what he had agreed to do. But Bruce made haste slowly.

The horses were left at the livery stable with orders for them to be fed oats and given a good rubbing down. Next came a stop at the little hotel, where Bruce ordered a hearty breakfast.

Along with the food and coffee he gathered in the latest news. Mame, the lone "biscuit shooter," always knew everything about everyone in and around Ariquito.

"No, sir. Mr. March hasn't come back yet from his trip north. No, the Bar L hasn't got any cattle cars. Have another cup of coffee,

Sid. You're looking sort of pale around the gills. No, nary an empty has been hauled past south in the last four days. Seems like nobody can get cars these days when they're needed. Better finish your prunes, Sid. Mr. Stanhope's right. They're good for you. Yes, the Bar L car scorched in an hour ago. No, not Miss Jo. It was Bill and Pat. They got a wire from Mr. March and hit the back trail hard, looking mighty peeved. Take just one more cup of coffee, Sid, to top off with. Yes, I know what that wire said. I pumped it out of old Jake. Only I'm not telling you. It's private."

"You're a good girl, Mame," said Bruce, and he slapped a dollar on the oilcloth. "Come on, Corveau."

On their way to the town hall they called at the office of their lawyer. By his advice, Corveau wrote out his evidence in the form of an affidavit, while Bruce arranged with the old judge for a private hearing and called in the sheriff. At a word from Bruce, Corveau read his statement.

Pierson and the judge were thunder-struck. But the little sheriff rallied at once to the defense of the man who had elected him.

"Hold on, Your Honor," he interrupted, when Corveau held up his hand to swear to the affi-

davit. "I know Sid was on a drunk when he alleges this happened. I object to his evidence as incompetent."

"The proper time for that will be when the men are brought to trial," replied the judge, and he swore Corveau to the affidavit.

Pierson promptly jabbed his revolver muzzle against the informer's spine.

"Stick up t'other one, Sid. You've confessed to a crime."

Corveau cast a hurried look at Bruce, and obeyed. The expert hand of the sheriff relieved him of his pair of sixes.

"All right. Now turn 'round. Give us your wrists—one at a time. No tricks."

A pair of heavy steel handcuffs appeared in the sheriff's right hand. Corveau slowly lowered his own right hand. Spots of scarlet burned in his hollow cheeks. His eyes sank sheepishly before the piercing gaze of the wary officer——

How it happened Pierson knew least of all. At the touch of the steel Corveau's hand struck out quicker than eye could follow. Pierson suddenly found himself facing the muzzle of his own gun.

"That's it," mocked Corveau. "Say *whoa* to yourself. Half a wiggle, and I'll send you

where you belong. Savvy? I come here all ready to take a room in your hostelry. I'd 'a' handed over my guns peaceful. You tricked me. You tried to do me dirt—wanted to parade me 'round with the hobbles on."

"Easy, Sid," said Bruce. "Give me a look-in. Your Honor, Mr. Pierson has shown how he stands in this matter. I offer all I have as a bond that Sid will appear for trial."

"I release him on your personal recognizance, Stanhope—no bond is necessary."

"Thanks. Now, if you please, I want to swear out warrants against every man who had a part in the murder of Uncle Pete."

"Including me," demanded Corveau. "I ain't rounding on the bunch to save my own neck."

He took his revolvers back from Pierson and returned the latter's weapon—unloaded. The old judge had taken up the affidavit. He looked over his spectacles at Bruce.

"Why not wait a while about Mr. March? Sid does not name him."

"I'd give a good deal if I could, Your Honor," replied Bruce.

Pierson spat out his ultimatum in a voice that shook with suppressed rage and humiliation.

"I serve no warrants issued on the affidavit of a drunken perjurer."

"Now, now," said Corveau soothingly. "Nemmind. Rest easy. You ain't needed. Besides, we'd be looking for bullets in our backs if you trailed along with us."

"Enough of this!" ordered the judge. "Sheriff, you refuse to perform your sworn duty. I will issue bench warrants and appoint Stanhope and Corveau to serve them as special officers of the court."

"All right, judge. Go ahead. But when Wynn March comes back we'll see about his being arrested."

The threat receiveo no more notice than a grin from Corveau. The judge and Bruce had started to make out the warrants.

Half an hour later the two special officers were on their way up the trail. All during the climb to the top they watched the north road out of Ariquito. No car or rider left the town.

" 'Bout the way I sized it up," commented Corveau. "Pierse is mighty strong for Windy, but there ain't much love lost between him and Bill."

Bruce had no thought to waste upon the little sheriff. Enough for him that no one appeared in a hurry to carry a warning to the Bar L. He remained silent throughout the ride back across

the mountains. Behind him trailed Corveau, equally silent.

Near the fork of the trail they had a view both of the valley and the open range. No change in the valley—but a great change outside. Where one day before the arid sun-scorched prairie had been dotted with restless famished cattle, now could be seen only a few motionless bodies, while from the sky above black-winged vultures were spiraling downward.

Corveau pointed to the southward. Six or eight miles away a cloud of alkaline dust was wavering in the heat waves like a dawn mist. His drooping mouth twisted in a wry look.

"Tough on the beasts. Bill counted too sure on tapping our tank. Held off the drive too late. Poor grass and bad water when they get there. May pinch through with half or two-thirds of the herd. Rest'll lay down on the way."

Bruce's jaw clenched hard.

"It's on March. You know it. All he had to do was ask for the water."

"Sure. 'Taint on you a-tall. Only——"

The words died away behind Corveau's tightening lips. Bruce jerked out a curt order:

"Ranch first."

He quickened the pace. They came down most of the arroyo trail at a jog. On the level

road Chico broke into a lope. Neither Bruce nor Corveau was in a mood for caution. Approaching the Bar L they kept on without drawing rein. A rifleman hidden in the barn could easily have shot down one if not both of them as they loped near.

They had reason to believe, however, that all the men had gone with the herd. The exception, if any, would be Lomax. To make certain, they stopped at the barn. No horses in the corral and none in the stalls. Even the car was gone.

A hasty search of the sheds and bunkhouse found all unoccupied. Bruce sighted a corner of the car in front of the ranch house. They sprinted their horses to head off an escape. . . . . Mrs. Lomax sat rocking in the front veranda. She glared at the sudden on-rushing attackers.

"Where is Miss March?" Bruce asked. "I have something to tell her."

"Tell away. That's all she'll listen to you."

Bruce was off and up the steps and into the house before the woman could get out of her chair. All the inner doors stood open. He knocked, called, and looked. Josie was not in the house. He came out past the acridly exultant step-aunt.

"Car here—horses all gone. We'll find her with the herd—Lomax also," he predicted. "We can arrest him same time as the others."

The gaping lantern jaw of Mrs. Lomax snapped shut like a steel trap. She darted into the house.

"Shy clear!" warned Corveau.

He spurred his horse into a dash at right angles to the road. Bruce followed, none too quickly. Mrs. Lomax burst from the kitchen doorway with an old double-barreled shotgun. At sight of the escaping riders she screamed and fired both barrels.

Though the buckshot carried with great force, Bruce was far enough away for them to scatter widely. They buzzed around him like angry hornets. But only one of them stung. It scorched a hair brand across Chico's hock.

The close shave stirred Corveau to a semblance of his old de'il-may-care cheerfulness.

Nine miles beyond the Grass Valley gap they neared the rear of the slowly drifting dust cloud. The herd had gone almost as far as the water-famished animals could be driven without a rest. For the last mile the up-slopes showed more and more calves and old cows that had lain down and could not be roused to stagger on.

The dimly seen straggling rear of the herd

came clearer into view through the dust. Close upon their flanks cowboys were shouting and waving their ropes and firing occasional shots to urge on the exhausted beasts. No one in the widely spaced line of punchers looked back. To help the drive, the chuck wagon was bumping along in the middle of the line.

Through the fog of dust Bruce made out Lomax, first rider to the left of the wagon. He next recognized the head, shoulder, and outstretched arms of the wagon driver. As he veered for the wagon he pointed toward Lomax.

"Go get him."

Corveau went after his man like a weasel after a rabbit.

CHAPTER XXIX

FRUIT OF HATE

JOSIE did not see Bruce until he rode up alongside the front wheel of the chuck wagon. She jerked the horses to a halt and stared down at him, startled and bewildered. Through her wonderment shot a flame of angry reproach.

"You—come to see the herd suffer!"

"No, to make a bargain with you. Corveau has turned state's evidence. I'm here with warrants against the men who killed my uncle. But the cattle—I've no need now to break your father that way. Head them back. I'll be glad to give you the water."

She did not seem to hear the offer.

"Warrants? You can't convict any one for that. They were a posse."

"Here comes Lomax. Ask him."

Corveau and Lomax came aslant behind the laggard rear-guard of out-spent cows. The face

of the big foreman was sallow gray under its coating of dust.

" 'Sall right," said Corveau. "The little coyote trotted along like a lamb."

"Oh, Sid!" cried Josie. "I never before knew you to be hateful. He didn't hurt you last night, and they didn't get the water that belongs to us. Yet now you and Bruce follow us, when you know how great is our trouble——"

"Yes, we know," replied Bruce. "Your father has failed to get cars. All the herd will be lost if you go on south. Head them back. I'll turn loose plenty of water. There's the old standing hay up the valley—or you can buy our corn."

"Bruce!—oh Bruce! Do you really mean—— But those warrants?"

He drew from his pocket and held one out at Lomax.

"William Lomax, as a special officer of the court, I arrest you on the charges of brand-blotting, conspiracy, and murder."

Lomax flung out a wildly protesting hand.

"I didn't shoot Haines—I didn't! It's a lie! I wasn't there! Jo knows I wasn't there—I took her to town that day. Ask her! Didn't I, Jo?"

"No need," replied Bruce. "By helping brand-blot the cows and plant them on my

uncle, you're as guilty of his murder as every man who was present when he was shot."

"Every man!"—Josie flamed with passionate indignation. "Don't you dare say that! Don't you dare call my dad a—a murderer!"

Bruce looked at her with deepest pity in his blue eyes.

"I'm sorry, Jo. He was there with the others. I have a warrant for him also. If he did not put Lomax and the others up to the brand-blotting, he can prove it and clear himself. For your sake, Jo, I hope he can."

"Of course he can! It's a shame—a dreadful shame! Why, it was Haines who did the blotting. You must be crazy!"

"Sid has made oath that the Bar L did it to trap my uncle. But he is not certain that your father ordered it done."

Lomax had hunched his head between his shoulders. His pale eyes narrowed craftily.

"We'll see 'bout what he ordered done. I ain't going to protect Uncle Wynn and swing too. He's got to clear me, along with himself. You can tell him that, Jo."

Josie's eyes dilated with horror. The coward not only was virtually confessing the crime—he was seeking to implicate her father.

"You—you did that . . . and now—to save yourself—you'd try to shift it on to dad!"

"I didn't!" he denied. "Nobody can prove I own up to anything. Sid was drunk. It's all a mistake . . . leastways about me having any part in the—in what was done. I'm not saying about Pat and Al and Lefty. But I pair with Uncle Wynn. He clears me, or I turn state's evidence, too."

"Willyum," said Corveau, "I been calling you a coyote and a skunk. I apologize—to the critters. I sure do humbly ask their pardon."

Bruce cut in warningly: "O'Keefe! Lomax, get up on the wagon."

The cessation of the foreman's yells and shots had drawn the attention of O'Keefe, first man over on the other side of the wagon. Bruce and Corveau rode around to meet him as Lomax hurriedly scrambled up over the wheel. Regardless of Josie's shrinking from him, he crouched on the seat, as close to her as possible.

O'Keefe was a man of another temper. Recognition of the visitors caused him neither to stop nor to turn back. He rode up to within a dozen feet of Corveau, upon whom he fixed his morose eyes.

" 'Lo, Pat," greeted Corveau. "Dry weather?

How'd you like a drink on me—at Pierse's hostelry?"

"What d'you want?" growled the gunman. "Stopping our drive!"

Bruce answered tersely: "We want you—for brand-blotting and murder."

O'Keefe glared at Corveau. His voice dropped to a low pitch.

"You double-crossing son of a——"

The three shots blurred together in one report. O'Keefe jumped convulsively and pitched backward out of his saddle. Corveau swayed, recovered his seat, and flipped one revolver back into its holster, to clap the hand against the side of his head.

"Scratch only!" he exulted. "Always told him I could beat him to it!"

Bruce started to sheath his pistol. From behind came a sharper, snappier report than the revolver shots. Corveau bobbed forward on the horn of his saddle as if struck in the back with a hammer. Bruce, twisting about to fire, jerked his weapon upward. Lomax was huddled so low behind Josie that even Corveau would not have chanced a shot. Only one freckled hand showed beside the girl's elbow. It gripped a small pistol.

"You next!" yelled the skulker.

Bruce flung himself down under the neck of Chico—the pistol blazed out its second shot. But the bullet flew wide and high. Josie's upflung elbow had knocked the muzzle off aim. She clutched the pistol with the strength of frantic horror and tore it out of Lomax's grasp.

"Stop!" she screamed at Bruce. "Stop or I'll shoot!"

He swung clear of Chico, thrust his pistol again into its holster, and stepped toward the wagon.

"Lomax is coming with me," he said. "He is going to hang for Sid, if not for Uncle Pete."

"No, no—look!" She pointed to Corveau, still in his saddle and trying to straighten up. "Help him! Get him away quick! The men are coming!"

"I'll not go without——"

The frantic girl put her pistol to her breast. "Go—or I'll shoot myself!"

Ready as was Bruce to face his own death, the desperate look in Josie's eyes told him she would do as she had said. He mounted Chico and lifted the half unconscious Corveau into his arms.

As he rode off he saw Josie jump down to spring upon Lomax's horse. Three of the pun-

chers had bunched for an attack. The girl raced to wave them back. Lomax yelled for them to shoot. She cried for them to wait. All three happened to be old employees of the Bar L. They obeyed Josie in preference to the foreman.

Al and Lefty were far forward on the flanks of the herd, out of sight. No shot was fired after Bruce as, with his sagging burden in his arms, he sent Chico galloping back along the trail ground deep by the many thousands of hoofs.

Beyond rifleshot he stopped to open his canteen and hold it to Corveau's bloodless lips. The water partly roused the wounded man. His dimmed eyes stared down at the red blotch on the front of his shirt.

"In—back. Just like—Bill," he whispered.

Slight as was the effort of speaking, red froth appeared on his lips. Bruce drew him into an easier position and spoke in a voice that vainly sought to keep from shaking.

"Don't talk, buddy. I'll get you home all right. You'll pull through—you've got to, old-timer. I'm siding you now for keeps."

This time the half glazed eyes brightened and looked upward. The pain-drawn lips quirked at the corners in a ghost of a smile.

"M' side-kick!" they murmured. "I got Pat. Can tell now—he shot your uncle."

The disclosure soothed Bruce's torn spirit like balm upon a bruise. The actual killer of his uncle had been killed. Corveau had not only proved his loyalty; he had struck the first blow in the punishment of the murderers.

CHAPTER XXX

THE SMITTEN ROCK

ALL the long miles back to the gap Bruce carried his friend in his arms like a child, clear of the saddle. There was no jolting or bumping to increase the flow from the wound. Though unconscious, Corveau was still alive when they came to the gap fence. Bruce rode through the opening cut by the fugitives after the attempt to blow up the dam. The half mile on up to the tent was at last covered.

The thirty-eight caliber steel-jacketed bullet from Josie's pistol had gone clear through Corveau's small body, from back to front. Bruce felt sure that it had pierced the edge of the right lung. But after Corveau was quiet in a bunk, first-aid treatment at last stanched the wound. The odor of strong vinegar brought him back to consciousness.

"Here you are, buddy — all punctures patched," reassured Bruce. "To-night, if you feel like it, I'll take you to town. Have a

drink and go to sleep. I have my work cut out."

Corveau sipped some water and closed his eyes. There was nothing more that Bruce could do for him until a long rest should show whether the trip to Ariquito could be borne. He hastened out of the tent. Corveau's horse had followed the retreat to the valley. Bruce sprang upon him, having need for Chico later.

He galloped to the cañon and up its narrow gorge, stopping only at the powder cache. At the dam the boxes of T N T still lay where they had been unloaded by the Bar L punchers. Bruce carried them up the slope to the dam.

The gasolene drill, which in the dark had been unnoticed by Lomax and O'Keefe, waited, ready for use, only a few feet to one side of the tunnel. Bruce edged in with it beside the spouting stream from the four-inch hole. He knew the exact thickness of the stone.

An hour's drilling satisfied him. To the caps of his charges he attached long fuses, coiled clear of the water. When all was ready he lighted the fuses, ran down the slope of rocks, and loped the horse for the cañon mouth.

They still had many yards to cover when the roar of the blasts reverberated down the gorge. But the sound traveled faster than the water.

The horse had floundered up out of the pool of the intake dam before the torrent swirled into sight.

The flow was not the flood that Bruce had expected. It measured no more than the average volume of the creek at the end of the rains. Yet it would be enough and to spare. Bruce closed the intake gate of the ditch. The creek swelled up over the spillway of the dam and came purling down the sun-baked bed of the arroyo as he galloped along the bank, back to the tent.

Corveau had not moved. He lay very still, but it was only the stillness of a state midway between torpor and natural sleep. The faint flush in his cheeks quieted Bruce's startled concern.

Much work remained to be done. Bruce took the tractor down to the arroyo crossing, churned through the swelling stream, and cut the gap fence on the far side. Fastened to the rear of the tractor, the wires stripped easily from the posts as he drove aslant the gap.

He cast loose the strands and drove in across to strip a quarter-mile of wires from the eastward end of the south fence. A way was now wide open from the gap into his section and on into the full sweep of Grass Valley. He left

the tractor on that side and ran afoot straight to the arroyo and across to the tent.

The wounded man still lay in semi-comatose sleep. Yet his vitality was strong. The smell of cooking roused him to hungry consciousness. He drank all the hot bouillon and coffee that Bruce dared give him. The stimulating drink carried him past all danger of collapse from shock and revived a good part of his strength. He remained quiet only because urged by Bruce. Obedience to orders not to talk, he showed his approval of what Bruce had done and intended to do, by smiling.

The red glare of sunset began to fade. Bruce packed his saddle-bags, gave Corveau another round of bouillon and coffee, and set water and more food within easy reach. The time had come for another parting. It might be their last. He gripped the wounded man's half raised hand.

"*Adios,* buddy. Don't worry. They'll not get me."

As Chico loped from the gap, the twilight was still clear. Out on the prairie where a broad streak of dust marked the trail of the herd, a scattered line of cattle was streaming north toward the creek. These were the herd stragglers that had lain down to die. Neither

whip nor gunshots had been able to get them up on their feet. But they had smelled the water in the creek and were staggering toward it as fast as their tottery legs would carry them.

Bruce smiled with relief. He had been reared on the range. Famished cattle meant waste—and he had no relish for the suffering of dumb brutes. The hope came to him that mass instinct would carry the glad news of water all the way to the main herd.

To avoid the not improbable stampede of the thousands of thirst-maddened cattle, he kept Chico over near the base of the front ridge. But as they loped along, the backward-drifting line of stragglers failed to thicken. Nearly ten miles from the gap the line came to a sudden end.

Dusk was closing down over the prairie. Bruce put Chico into full gallop aslant a rise that shut off the view ahead. Over the round of the long swell he at last made out the dark mass of the great herd. The exhausted beasts had gone on only a short distance from where the fight had taken place. They had bedded down, out-spent by a drive too hard for their famished bodies.

On the near flank, at the edge of the beaten trail, flickered a small camp fire. Bruce rode straight toward it through the deepening night.

He soon made out five men seated around the fire, intent upon their supper. One of them heard the clink of Chico's shod hoof on a pebble and sprank to his feet.

"Sit down," called Bruce. "You're covered. First man moves gets it. I want Lomax, Al, and Lefty. No warrants against the rest of you."

"Come and get 'em, young feller," jeered a grizzled puncher. "Help yourself. Mebbe you'll see 'em if you look with a double-barrel spyglass."

"What's been your hurry?" chimed in another mocker. "'Pears sort of like your birds got tired of waiting and hopped the coop."

"Where's Miss March?" demanded Bruce in a tone that put quick end to the banter.

A third man answered soberly:

"Miss Jo and Bill pulled out with Pat in the chuck wagon, as soon as you left, Mr. Stanhope. Looks like mebbe they took him on into town."

"He wasn't killed, then?"

"Wasn't, huh? Sid never done a better job. Say, how 'bout Sid? Did he get his? Miss Jo said it looked bad."

The note of sympathy brought quick response from Bruce.

"Sid's not dead yet—not by a good deal. I take it, the rest of you are on the square. I have good news for the Bar L. Only, first, I want Al and Lefty."

"You'll find 'em 'cross the Border. They streaked it south soon's Miss Jo got out of sight."

The disclosure did not altogether displease Bruce. His main purpose was to clear the good name of his uncle, not to exact vengeance. The fugitives had confessed their guilt by flight. This would corroborate the testimony of Corveau against Lomax.

"All right. That proves they helped Bill do the brand-blotting. Now, about my news—I've opened my dam. The creek is running a good flow. Start the herd back, and they'll soon smell the water. Another thing——Tell Miss March for me, Grass Valley is wide open, and so is Sid's and my cornfield. Head the herd up that way."

The astounded punchers stared mutely into the gloom that hid the speaker. Bruce swung Chico around and jogged back toward the valley. He had more than made good his offer to Josie. Now he must go on with the bitter fight against her father.

CHAPTER XXXI

CAUGHT

CORVEAU was awake and feverishly restless. Constant urging was needed to keep him quiet until the moon rose. By first lifting him into the truck Bruce managed to get him on Chico without any jolt or strain. He held him clear of the saddlehorn in a canvas sling belted over his own shoulders.

With Corveau's horse in lead, he started Chico up the trail at a walk. The moonlight was bright, and the rest had given Chico back all his strength. He bore his double burden up the mountain without a stumble. The night air cooled Corveau's feverishness, and Bruce held him gently in the swing. Soothed by the monotonous swaying of horse and rider, the wounded man fell asleep before the end of the first hour.

Mile after mile the black-shadowed cedars and rocks of the top trail drifted past, until their moonlit procession cast an hypnotic spell upon

Bruce. Out-wearied by hard riding and loss of sleep, he sank into a half-trance—a dreamy state between sleep and waking.

Corveau was not bad. He never had been bad. Young and thoughtless and keen for excitement, inflamed with the drink given him by the others, he had joined in the brand-blotting. Legally he was as guilty as the others. But he had not been vicious. And he had not asked for immunity. He had faced death to bring his fellow conspirators to justice, expecting to hang with them. . . . No man could ask for a more loyal pardner.

The last mile into Ariquito found Bruce wide awake. The steadily increasing ache of his muscles under the strain of Corveau's weight had grown into a torture of shooting pains. A shift of position would have eased his suffering. But he had not dared to make the slightest change for fear of tearing open the wounds of his friend.

Somehow he managed to hold out while Chico covered the last long twists of the trail down into town. They came to a halt before the vine-covered porch of the doctor's home.

A shout brought Perkins to his door in slippers and pajamas. He was young and strong

and accustomed to handling injured men. He carried Corveau into the house, unaided.

Bruce reeled in after them and collapsed. He was in a torpor of sleep when Perkins finished examining Corveau. Finding Bruce unwounded, he let him lie. But at dawn he roused him with a vigorous shake.

"Wake up, Stanhope. You're needed."

"What's that? Sid's not—not worse?"

"No. He has a fair chance—thanks to you. Hard to kill a bundle of wire and leather like him. But I've just heard that Lomax is in town. Last evening the judge told me the facts about your uncle. Pete Haines was a friend of mine. Get busy. Try the hotel first."

Mame, the waitress, had just come out to sweep the porch of the shack hotel when Bruce jumped from his saddle. He had seen the girl make eyes at Corveau.

"Bill Lomax shot Sid yesterday," he called to her. "I'm after him."

"Sid!" she cried. "Him shoot Sid? Must have got him in the back."

"Yes. What's the number of his room?"

"The sneak! Shoot and run—that's him to a T!"

"Run?"

"I helped 'em get off on the four A. M.—him and his ma and Miss Jo."

"Taking them south? It can't be! Why should Jo go south?"

"I heard him knock at their door just before train time. He was too scairt to speak low. He told Miss Jo he'd got a wire from her pa down 'cross the Border. Said the old man had learnt of your warrant against him and jumped over into Sonora."

Bruce rode hot to the railroad. When shown the warrant against Lomax, the old station agent denied that March had sent any telegram from the south. Bruce glanced at the clock and cut the man short. According to the time-table, the southbound train was already due at the little town on the Border.

"Send this wire, rush," he ordered: "Five hundred reward for arrest of tall man Lomax and mother kidnapping girl. Hold all three."

A twenty-dollar bill send the agent hurrying to his key. He clicked off the message. Back came an answering run of clicks. He bobbed his grey head at Bruce and pocketed the bank note.

"You're in luck, Mr. Stanhope. Train only just in sight, he says. Town marshal is always handy, down there on the Border."

Bruce went to rout out the banker and draw five hundred dollars. The little jerk-water narrow-gauge railroad ran only one train a day each way. He had no intention of waiting until the next morning. Chico had been watered and fed by the doctor. Within a half hour Bruce was riding south.

A beeline across country clipped many miles from the distance around the winding curves of the railroad, and Chico was willing. Four hours from Ariquito—forty miles of hills and prairie—Bruce looked down from a cactus-covered ridge at the little adobe town that squatted on the boundary line between Arizona and Sonora.

The town marshal, a lean old Arkansan, squinted at Bruce's papers and welcomed him like a long lost brother. Rewards of half a thousand dollars are not picked up every day.

"Boahded the train, suh, up at the tank, an' nailed yoah pahties right off, suh. You brought the five hunnud?"

"It's a C. O. D. transaction," replied Bruce.

The marshal unlocked an inner door and beckoned Bruce to enter. He had taken no chances of losing the reward. Lomax was chained to a ring-bolt in the wall. His mother was handcuffed to him, and Josie to her. All

looked up at Bruce with a quick flare from despondency into anger.

His own eyes flashed even more angrily though for another reason.

"Take those irons off the ladies," he ordered.

"Suppose, suh, we fust see that rewahd, suh," drawled the Arkansan.

Bruce tossed him the five hundred dollars and turned to Josie, crimson with shame.

"Miss March, you can't believe that I wanted you or your aunt insulted this way. But I had to stop Lomax. He lied to you. Your father is not in Mexico. He did not wire to Lomax. He is still up north."

"You—you sheepherder!" shrilled Mrs. Lomax. "Don't you dare say my William lied!"

"Look at him," said Bruce. "He knows he's caught. If you don't believe me, Jo, wire to Ariquito—to the station agent—to any of your father's friends."

Josie gazed wide-eyed at her sullen-faced step-cousin.

"Where is the telegram from dad, Bill, directing you to bring me to Chihuahua?"

Lomax averted his head.

"You see, Jo," went on Bruce. "The message was a forgery. How about it, Lomax? You go back with me anyway on the other

charge. Do you want Jo and your mother to cross the Border alone?"

"I won't go among them greasers without William," snapped Mrs. Lomax.

"But if dad is at Chihuahua—you'll take me to him, Aunt Hetty—please!"

The woman shot a venomous glance at Bruce.

"Drat the meddler! It was just to save you from him, Josephine. Once we were safe across the Border, William would have married you—as Wynn wanted."

The truth forced itself in upon the girl's loyal mind.

"O—oh! Then it really was so. You and Bill were kidnapping me!"

Perverted vanity stung Lomax into boasting of his infamy——

"I'd have got you and the herd too, if Sid hadn't shot Pat. I fooled you about your pa having cars ready. I and Pat and Al and Lefty had it all framed up to stampede the whole herd 'cross the Border. I was to split fifty-fifty with the gang and get you to boot."

The marshal had at last finished counting the bank notes. He jerked out his keys and unlocked the handcuffs from Josie's wrist. She came straight to Bruce and held out an appealing hand.

"Say you forgive me for doubting you!"

"You've had good cause, Jo. I allowed hate to ride me. Think of all your cattle—famished for water—thousands of them ready to die! My only excuse is that I did not know they were so far gone. I gave Lomax credit for better sense."

"He was sure he could blow up your dam—and—now I see it all! He wanted to kill you and Sid before stealing the herd. . . . But you said you would give us water."

"And feed, Jo. The creek is flowing. I told your men to head the herd up-stream. All the grass and corn are wide open to them."

"Oh, Bruce! That leaves only dad. . . ."

"I've told you I was hate-ridden. I was only too willing to suspect your father. But now I know that O'Keefe was the one who shot my uncle. I'll take your father's word that he had nothing to do with the brand-blotting."

Mrs. Lomax thought she saw a favorable opening.

"You best ask him to let William go, Josephine. If it comes to the pinch, he'll have to join Al and Lefty in testifying against your father."

" 'Fraid Bill will have to do all his own lying," said Bruce. "Al and Lefty *vamosed* yes-

terday. Bill must face Sid without any backing, and Sid's word is good."

Josie shuddered and smiled, all in the same moment.

"Poor Sid! Shot in the back—and my pistol! . . . He's not—not——?"

"No. Doc says he'll live. I carried him all the way to town in my arms."

"You did?" Josie took two quick steps that brought her very close. Her brown eyes shone up at him, aglow with tender radiance. She murmured in a very small voice: "If—if I were hurt, Bruce, would you care to carry me that way?"

Regardless of her vindictively glaring step-aunt, of Lomax's sullen jealousy, of the marshal's grin, Bruce swept up the girl in his arms.

CHAPTER XXXII

THE LAST BLOW

OUT in the street the sight of the patiently waiting Chico reminded Bruce that arrangements must also be made for his passage. Space was found in one end of a half-loaded boxcar.

Aboard the train Bruce had the marshal take the handcuffs from Lomax. But during the trip he sat with Josie, facing his prisoner and Mrs. Lomax. The coward was too broken spirited to attempt an escape.

At Ariquito the four went direct to the town hall, where the old judge promptly committed Lomax, to be held for trial without bail. Told by Josie about the attempted kidnapping, Sheriff Pierson was only too willing to take charge of the prisoner.

Bruce saw Oliver Bray in the crowd that had jammed into the court room. He drew Josie aside.

"Listen, Jo. They've been wiring your father. Chances are he will get here on the

next train. He may try to send you away. Marry me to-day."

She did not hesitate an instant.

"If you wish it, dear. Maybe, when he finds it settled. . . ."

The crowd had started to disperse. As Bray drifted back to his office, Bruce elbowed a way after him for Josie. But Mrs. Lomax caught sight of them in the doorway and hastened to follow.

Bruce was demanding a license from the greatly shocked Mr. Bray when Mrs. Lomax darted into the office and pounced upon Josie.

"Don't you dare give him a license, Ollie Bray," she warned. "She ain't of age yet, and her pa's set against her marrying him. You know he is."

Bray caught at the excuse.

"It's—it's true, Stanhope—and it's the law. Miss Jo is less than eighteen. I can't issue a license without the consent of her father. It wouldn't be legal. Ask your lawyer. Ask the judge."

Bruce turned his back upon the suavely exultant recorder.

"The law is the law, Jo. We'll have to wait till you're eighteen. Shall I take you to Mrs. Tolliver or to——"

"She goes to the hotel with me till Wynn comes," broke in Mrs. Lomax. "I'm her guardian while he's away."

Josie shrank from her step-aunt.

"Oh, Bruce, no—not after what she and Bill tried to do."

"You hear, ma'am," said Bruce. "Leave her alone, or I'll swear out a warrant charging you with kidnapping. It's a penitentiary offense."

For once in her life the woman was cowed. She scuttled from the recorder's office in a flurry that left Bray gaping.

To divert Bruce from his disappointment, Josie asked him to take her to Corveau. The doctor met them at his door with a smile; but barred their entrance.

"Sid is doing very well," he reported. "Miss Mame has come to nurse him. If kept perfectly quiet—no visitors—he will pull through all right."

The big whole-souled wife of Tolliver, the postmaster-storekeeper, was delighted to take in the daughter of Wynn March.

She whisked Josie into the living rooms off the store before Bruce could as much as say good-bye. Deprived of Josie's company, he had to find some means of avoiding his bitter thoughts as well as the unwelcome curiosity of

the town people. He went to tell his lawyer that he no longer wished to contest March's suits for right-of-way and water.

Not wishing to lose his prospective fees, the lawyer raised objections and asked many questions. Bruce ended by telling him all that had happened, even up to and including his attempt to get a marriage license.

"You have been generous—foolishly generous," commented the man of law and technicalities. "Mr. March will take every advantage of what you have done. However, he may remit to you the five hundred dollar reward."

"I don't want it back. It was little enough to pay for the privilege of saving her from Lomax."

"Ah, indeed. And would you consider a like amount a reasonable fee for legal advice how to obtain a license?"

"Show me!" cried Bruce.

The lawyer told him to wait. He was gone the better part of an hour. He returned smiling.

"Mrs. Lomax is not the guardian of Miss March. Write me your check for the five hundred. All you need do is this——"

Bruce listened with close attention as the lawyer explained in untechnical language. At the

end he wrote his check and handed it over to the adviser.

The distance from the lawyer's office to Tolliver's store was covered by Bruce in less than half a minute. But he had many minutes to wait after his urgent message was taken in to Josie. He hurried her off to the town hall, explaining on the way.

They caught the old judge in the act of leaving his bench.

"One moment, if it please Your Honor," Bruce imitated his lawyer. "This minor child—Miss Josephine March—having only one parent, wishes the court to appoint a guardian chosen by herself."

"So—so?" queried the judge, his eyes twinkling shrewdly over his spectacles. "Whom does Miss Josephine March wish appointed her guardian?"

Josie blushed but answered bravely: "I choose Mr. Bruce Stanhope."

A little later Bruce and Josie marched into the recorder's office, armed with a court document and backed by the judge.

"Mr. Bray," said Bruce, "I have been made the legal guardian of Miss March. As her guardian, I hereby hand you my written consent for her marriage to myself."

"But—but her father is coming home," faltered Bray. "I think I had better wait and ask him. He would be annoyed at me if I——"

"I'll be more so," broke in Bruce. "If you don't want to be manhandled, fork over that license *muy pronto!*"

Bray cast a look of anguished appeal at Josie and the judge. Neither gave him any sign of encouragement. He met Bruce's eye, and thrust out a shaking hand for his pen.

Bruce was in a fever of urgency. He favored immediate marriage by the judge. But he yielded to Josie's appeal for a church wedding. The delay allowed time for the news to spread. Before the bride and groom reached the little church, half the town was streaming ahead of them, keen to witness the ceremony.

For Josie March to marry the nephew of Pete Haines, against the wishes of her father was in itself no small sensation. A greater one could be expected when he should come back and learn what had happened. No one had ever known Windy March to forgive an insult or injury.

But for the moment Bruce and Josie had forgotten all else than their great happiness. They stood hand in hand, utterly oblivious to the stares and whispers of the crowd. The minister

began the marriage ceremony, solemnly intoning the words.

He ended a sentence, started another—and stopped short. His face went rigid; his eyes froze in a fixed stare over Josie's bowed head.

Bruce half turned. . . . The last comers, unable to find seats, had filled the centre aisle. Through their midst a big man was plowing his way forward. He raised his head. Under the broad hatbrim appeared the brick-red face of March. Bruce stepped clear of Josie and stood quietly waiting.

The church shook with March's bellow:

"Ho! Thought you'd beat me to it, did you?"

Josie cried out and sprang to throw a protecting arm about Bruce's neck. He unclasped it and pushed her aside with gentle force. March's hard face cracked into a grim smile.

"I've been getting no end of wires—know all about what's been going on. Came down from the Junction in a high-power car. . . . Here I am. Serve your warrant. If Sid says I had a hand in that damnable job against old Pete, he's a liar."

Bruce took out the warrant, flicked it open, and struck a match. He held the lighted paper

in his hand until all except the corner had burned to a crisp.

With no change in his look, March stepped forward and grasped Josie's hand. He faced about to the crowd of spectators. The more timid ones had started to edge toward the door. His great voice roared out louder than ever:

"Wait, you folks. I'm going to have my say. You all know about the fight between me and Pete Haines and between me and Pete's nephew. All right. Here's the first one. I stopped at the jail before hearing of this attempted wedding. I got Bill Lomax by the neck and shook it out of him. He confesses he and O'Keefe planned to do the brand-blotting and put it on old Pete. They wanted Pete's land. O'Keefe shot him, under cover of the warrant. Sid has saved the murderer from the noose. Bill is the son of my step-sister, but he goes to the penitentiary."

From all over the church came murmurs of surprise and approval. March jerked his free hand toward Bruce.

"Now about him. Old Pete was a hard man to buck against. His nephew is worse. He knocked me down with his fists. He butted me over with what's in his head. I thought I could bulldog any man in the county. He bull-

dogged me. He rode me to a stand. He roped and hogtied me. Then he cut the tie and let me up and turned me loose."

One of the cowman's big fists swung up and smashed down like a sledge into the palm of the other.

"But it's my turn now. He can't get away. My girl has her rope on him. He's got to take a third share in the Bar L brand. It's a case of majority rule. Jo and I have a two-thirds vote on him."

Josie caught at Bruce's arm and slung to him, overjoyed, beseeching.

"Oh, Bruce! You will—you must!"

"On the right terms," he qualified. "Sid and I are to throw in our land and irrigation project. I manage that end of the business, your father the stock end, and Sid is foreman——"

"That goes!" shouted March. He faced the out-bursting applause of the town people and won silence with a gesture.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he announced, "you may think I'm getting old and broken down. But if you'll watch, you'll now see me hold both these rampageous youngsters while the parson ties the knot."

THE END